

Local community systems improve access, use, and quality of important services for children and families

Key Findings

- Smart Beginnings (SB) initiatives foster community partnerships and collaboration, raise awareness about the importance of early childhood development and the need for high-quality programs and services, and lead efforts to coordinate and improve essential services and create an effective early childhood system.
- SB leaders and community members report that these efforts have positively impacted access, participation, and quality of essential early childhood programs and services.
- SB initiatives highly value the targeted technical support provided by VECF and consider this support important in creating and strengthening their community early childhood system.

Strong systems can help young children and their families thrive

Families rely on a range of organizations to support the health and development of their young children. In many communities, these services are uncoordinated and incomplete¹ which increases public and private sector costs. This can make it difficult for families to access needed supports. There are efforts across the United States to build local **early childhood systems** to coordinate the programs and services that support children and their families.² These systems building initiatives seek to increase the efficiency, access, utilization, and quality of services through focusing on the specific needs of families in their community. Creating such systems requires collaboration and coordination among community stakeholders who serve children and families.

Efforts to help states and communities establish effective and sustainable early childhood systems typically include 6 key components. **Cross-sector collaboration** to build positive relationships among stakeholders and increase public-private collaboration; **communication** that raises awareness about the importance of high-quality early childhood services, and engages families in systems; **financing** that integrates public and private funding; **systems design** that involves developing a plan to coordinate services and track outcomes; use of **quality standards/evidence-based practices**; and **data systems** to improve data collection, sharing, integration, and use. Further, successful early childhood systems building initiatives are often tailored to the unique needs of a specific community, have a diverse group of

leaders from numerous sectors, and receive technical assistance from a state-level entity.³

VECF launched Smart Beginnings to help local communities develop stronger early childhood systems

Since 2005, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) has served as the Commonwealth's non-partisan school readiness partner. VECF works to strengthen Virginia's state-local early childhood network by supporting its **Smart Beginnings (SB)** network. Seventeen SB initiatives serve approximately 80% of children and families in the Commonwealth. These partnerships combine the efforts of government agencies, non-profits, child care programs, and the business community to support the development of children and their families. SB's local systems building paved the way for other community-based early childhood initiatives including Virginia's Mixed-Delivery Preschool Grant Program and the receipt of a federal Preschool Development Grant (B-5).

Communities collaborate to improve access to quality resources

Each SB initiative is building an early childhood system differently, but there are commonalities across communities. Many reported that SB's efforts to convene and promote relationships across and among diverse stakeholders fostered new opportunities to expand resources, reduce duplication, and share knowledge in their community.

SB staff and partners also reported that the relationships fostered by the SB initiative helped agencies that once competed for fiscal resources to collaborate to pursue new sources of financial support.

Communities report positive impacts on quality, access, and use of services

Many SB members reported that systems building has improved the quality of supports available to providers, families, and children. Most directors reported that their SB initiative had a *major* or *moderate* effect on

- increasing the skills of the early childhood workforce,
- improving coordination of services and supports, and
- increasing use of evidence-based practices.

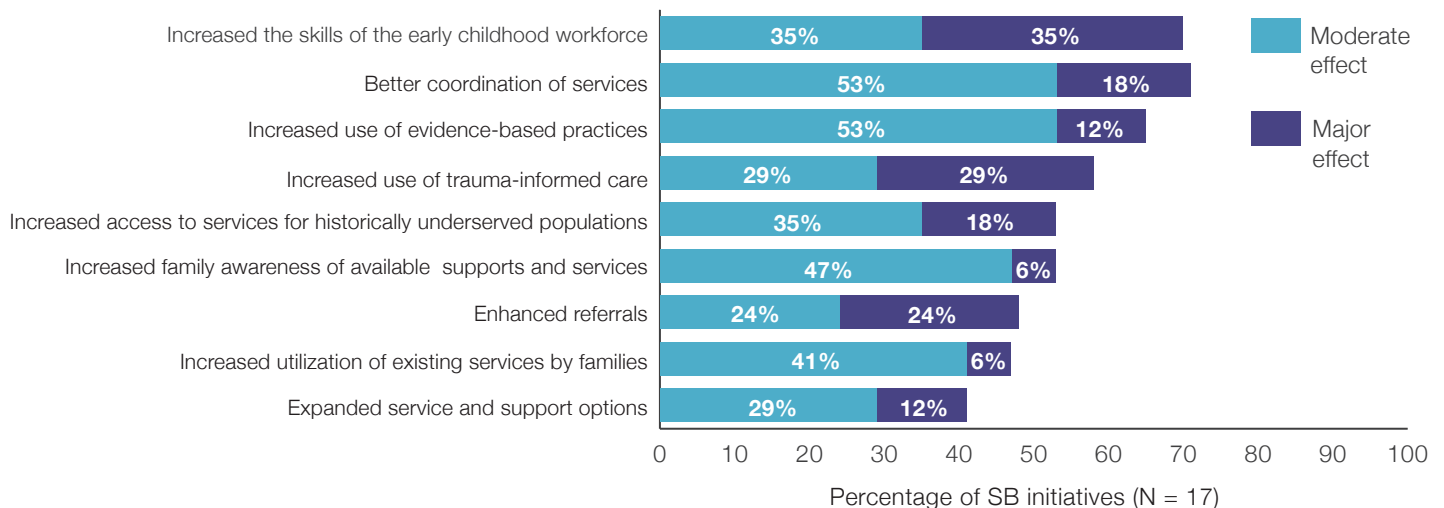
Through their SB relationships, local partners identified efficiencies that maximize available resources and enable families to access services. Interview respondents from two SB initiatives discussed the potential for families to access the full range of local supports by walking through “one door” with the assurance that anyone they contact may direct them to resources throughout the region. More than half of SB directors reported that their local initiative had a major or moderate positive effect on families’ awareness of services and on access for historically underserved populations.

Communities cannot do this alone

SB staff and partners described the importance of VECF providing targeted technical support, because no community has technical expertise to address all challenges of building a local early childhood system. As a trusted partner, VECF provides a needed conduit for communication between the state and the local communities. In one case, VECF brought specific local level barriers to the attention of state level officials who were able to resolve the issues impacting families. Likewise, VECF helps to communicate state interests, priorities and resources across local communities. SB staff and partners also noted the benefits of learning from their counterparts in other communities.

Despite the successes and valuable learnings from SBs, funding to sustain local early childhood systems-building efforts remains a challenge for many communities. Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that many Virginia communities are working to coordinate early childhood services and build local capacity to support school readiness.

Smart Beginnings initiatives had the greatest effect on increasing the skills of the early childhood workforce, improving coordination of services and supports, and increasing the use of evidence-based practices



Note: Numbers represent the percentage of Smart Beginnings directors who reported that their Smart Beginnings initiative has had a major or moderate effect on the specified outcome. Responses collected through a survey conducted by SRI.

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SRI wrote this brief independently under contract to VECF. SRI administered surveys to each of the 17 SB directors and conducted in-depth interviews with 53 SB staff and partners from 8 local SB initiatives. This brief summarizes preliminary findings; a full evaluation report will be available in spring 2020.

¹ Kagan, S. L., & Kauerz, K. (Eds.). (2012). *Early childhood systems: Transforming early learning*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

² Cobb, G., & Ponder, K. (2014). *The nuts and bolts of building early childhood systems through state/local initiatives*. Boston, MA: BUILD Initiative. Retrieved from <http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Nuts%20and%20Bolts%20of%20Building%20Early%20Childhood%20Systems%20through%20State-Local%20Initiatives.pdf>

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2016). *State-local models and approaches designed to build strong early learning systems: What states have learned*. Child Care State Capacity Building Center. Retrieved from https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/statelocalmodels_508.pdf