

# Advancing Local Early Childhood Systems in Virginia: Next Steps for Local, Regional, and State Stakeholders

## Executive Summary & Recommendations

**Strong local early childhood systems are key to ensuring the healthy development of young children.** Over the last decade, Virginia communities have leveraged public and private sector efforts to make substantial progress in coordinating and strengthening local early childhood systems. The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) partnered with researchers from SRI Education (SRI) to examine the progress and challenges of early childhood systems building in Virginia with a focus on communities that are part of VECF's Smart Beginnings network. This document summarizes the findings from that examination and provides recommendations for how VECF, state government, and local leaders can more equitably and effectively serve children and families.

## Supporting Children and Families During Extraordinary Times

This project is concluding during a period of great uncertainty. As early education and other child-focused service providers seek to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, families have lost access to crucial services. Many families have lost income and many of those who were struggling before the crisis have sunk deeper into poverty. At the same time, recent events have provided a stark reminder that the legacy of racial injustice – embedded in our systems – continues to bestow privilege on some while severely limiting opportunities for others.

These challenges will not be solved simply or quickly. Although we must have the patience to develop long-term remedies, we must also recognize the urgency of supporting the current generation of Virginia's youngest residents during the most sensitive period in their development. **It is incumbent upon VECF to advocate assertively to disrupt inequitable systems and rebuild equitable and durable systems for the good of the communities.**

The information included in this report indicates that, although each Virginia community has unique needs, some common approaches can strengthen early childhood systems statewide. These include maintaining a resolute focus on the central role of systems in improving outcomes for children by ending the perpetuation of disparities, gaining the sustained commitment of influential advocates across sectors, and addressing all aspects of the early childhood system.

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## Recommendations



### **Recommendation 1: Promote a systems-focused orientation for early childhood in Virginia**

#### **Strategy 1: Champion equitable and durable local early childhood systems**

Children are best able to thrive when their families are strong and well-supported.<sup>1</sup> Equitable and effective early childhood systems can help ensure that supports for families are coordinated and aligned to promote children's healthy development. Therefore, equity and justice must be key principles in the development and implementation of Virginia's local early childhood systems.

- VECF's public/private role provides a unique opportunity to articulate the value and essential nature of equitable early childhood systems building. We think it is important that VECF continues to make the case for systems building to all stakeholders, including policymakers, funders, practitioners, and parents. This could be done by documenting improved systems outcomes, such as cost-effectiveness of systems coordination, for equitably serving more families and children and providing higher quality services.
- VECF should help embed systems building in state government efforts by advocating for systems-building objectives and financing to be articulated in various state-level planning documents, policy statements, contracts, and budgets.

#### **Strategy 2: Commit to systemic solutions in policy, practice, and investments in young children and families**

Communities need resources that build their capacity to design, implement, and sustain systems building.

- VECF should support demonstrations of how existing initiatives can apply resources for systemic outcomes.
- Community systems-building initiative leaders can deepen their understanding of how to apply system design principles to their local context. VECF can help to build the capacities of local community leaders in this area through targeted training and technical assistance.
- State agencies should undertake a planning process to explore structural reforms and additional resources that could promote more effective state and local systems building. For example, state agencies may need to collaborate on blended funding or cross-agency initiatives that enable more holistic "wrap-around" supports for families and children. The state agencies should also provide resources through grants and financing mechanisms that require recipients to document their system design activities and plans for impacting systems-level outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> 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>



## Recommendation 2: Broaden the scope, participation, and integration of early childhood systems-building partnerships

### Strategy 1: Deepen engagement with local child- and family-supporting entities beyond those that focus on early childhood care and education

Smart Beginnings and other local initiatives have made tremendous progress building systems that provide young children and their families access to high quality early care and education.

- VECF should support the strategic facilitation of and technical assistance for communities' capacity to engage with a more comprehensive set of child- and family-serving entities.
- Community systems-building initiatives should seek greater coordination with the many other entities that interact with children and families. These include entities that serve children directly (e.g., health care systems, food and nutrition services, child welfare) and those that support parents and guardians (e.g., housing, mental health).

### Strategy 2: Strengthen the coordination of Virginia's early childhood systems investments

The use of flexible funding streams and integrated financing mechanisms across relevant state entities could facilitate more comprehensive cross-sector partnerships and coordination. This could provide structures and supports for local systems builders to broaden participation, expand coordination, and integrate financing across diverse stakeholders.

- VECF should conduct analyses and pilot demonstrations of integrated financing mechanisms to support and hold the state accountable for investment strategies and efficiencies.
- State leaders should model impactful, multi-sector systems building by strengthening connections and coordination among state agencies that fund the myriad services and systems that support young children and their families.

### Strategy 3: Improve understanding about and responsiveness to the needs, assets, barriers, and preferences of families to inform equitable systems design and implementation

VECF and Smart Beginnings initiatives have successfully engaged business leaders, educators, and state and local officials in guiding systems-building efforts. However, much of the engagement with families has been through one-way dissemination of information. Many local initiatives disseminate information widely to families, but few described actively engaging families to better understand their needs, assets, barriers, and preferences as part of local systems building planning.

- VECF should pilot and scale evidence-based strategies for genuine engagement of families in community systems building.
- Community systems-building initiatives should commit to consistent evidence-based strategies that authentically engage families as partners in planning, designing, and implementing systems solutions that help all families and communities thrive. Through their participation in local systems-building work, parents might also develop leadership skills that will build their capacity to advocate for their families and communities.

## Recommendation 3: Address the full range of components that enable equitable and durable local early childhood systems

### Strategy 1: Identify and address local systems gaps to inform strategic planning and action

Most Smart Beginnings local systems-building initiatives made substantial progress in using evidence-based practices, collaboration, and communication. System design, finance, and data systems often received less attention.

- VECF should target community-specific funding and technical assistance for addressing gaps in local systems building.
- Community systems-building initiatives should use the VECF strategy map<sup>2</sup> as a guide and regularly examine activities related to each of the six system components and track community-level indicators of system functioning. This information should then be central to the development of strategic plans and to the assessment of progress toward community and equity goals.

Key components of an early childhood system as depicted in the VECF Strategy Map



### Strategy 2: Invest in data systems and other strategies that promote equity and evidence-informed planning and decision making

Many leaders of Smart Beginnings local systems-building initiatives recognize the importance of using data for system planning and improvement. However, most did not report collecting, sharing, and analyzing data among their top priorities.

- VECF should help state initiatives to improve access and use of data systems through supporting pilots and demonstrations of new innovations and improvements, such as assigning unique student identifiers to children in prekindergarten rather than in kindergarten.
- State agency leaders should strengthen the culture of data sharing and data use across state entities through stepwise development of an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS). State agencies can support local departments in collecting and using disaggregated data to identify and address inequities and disparate outcomes to be targeted for greater investment. Particularly with the new data collection opportunities offered by the Preschool Development Grant Birth-5 (PDG B-5), the Virginia Department of Education is in a good position to support local communities by sharing information and building their capacity to use data.

<sup>2</sup> For more information see Mercier, B., Nakamura, J., Grindal, T., Chow, K. & Golan, S. (2020). *Advancing local early childhood systems in Virginia: Next steps for local, regional, and state stakeholders*. Arlington, VA: SRI International.