

Summary: Improving Virginia’s Early Childhood Development Programs

WHAT WE FOUND

One-third of all Virginia kindergartners may not be fully ready for school

Although many of Virginia’s young children do not need state-supported early childhood development programs, data indicate that about one-third start school lacking the social, self-regulation, literacy, or math skills needed for kindergarten. Certain factors, such as poverty, low birth weight, and maternal substance abuse, place a child’s healthy development at risk and can strongly influence whether a child is ready for school.

The state’s information about readiness and children at risk of poor developmental outcomes is not sufficient for identifying children and families at risk and assisting them through the state’s early childhood development programs.

Virginia’s voluntary home visiting programs are generally effective

Virginia’s seven voluntary home visiting programs demonstrate effective performance, are generally well designed, and have strong quality assurance mechanisms to ensure they are implemented as intended. Participants often have better outcomes than those who do not participate, both nationwide and in Virginia. For example, participants in Virginia’s home visiting programs for pregnant women are more likely than nonparticipants to carry their pregnancies to full term, which is associated with positive developmental outcomes. Virginia’s voluntary home visiting programs also feature the key components that experts generally agree are necessary to be effective.

However, these programs lack adequate administrative infrastructure to ensure effective coordination, evaluation, and planning across programs. The funding for voluntary home visiting programs in Virginia is unstable and difficult to predict each year, and this instability hinders the ability of the programs to operate consistently and strategically over time.

WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

In 2016 the General Assembly directed JLARC to identify and review state-supported early childhood development programs to determine the best strategy for future early childhood investments.

ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The brain develops most rapidly during the earliest years of a child’s life. The development (or “wiring”) that occurs as a result of early experiences, whether positive or negative, sets the foundation for future success. High-quality early childhood development programs improve children’s odds of success in school and life. However, careful attention is needed to whether programs are well designed, implemented as designed, and perform effectively. Virginia has 13 “core” early childhood development programs, which include seven voluntary home visiting programs, the Virginia Pre-school Initiative, the Child Care Subsidy Program, and two Individuals with Disabilities Education Act programs.

VPI improves literacy, but its impact on kindergarten readiness is unknown and program needs stronger assurances of program quality

The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) improves children's literacy skills, but literacy is recognized as a narrow measure of kindergarten readiness. The state lacks sufficient data to determine whether VPI is effective at improving other important skills, such as social skills and self-regulation skills, that children need to be ready for kindergarten.

There are a number of design and implementation concerns about the VPI program. Implementation of VPI is local, and at the state level, minimal staffing resources are available to administer the program. Further, the program has few features to ensure the program is providing high-quality pre-K experiences statewide. For example, despite the critical importance of high-quality teacher-child interactions, VPI has few assurances that they are occurring in VPI classrooms. In addition, the state has minimal effective controls over the quality of the curricula used by VPI providers. Many agency staff and experts expressed concern about the quality of curricula used by providers. JLARC staff identified eight VPI providers that reported using curricula that (1) do not appear to be research-based or (2) are not actual curricula.

Currently, the Appropriation Act directs the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to establish standards for kindergarten readiness and directs school divisions to certify that their VPI programs follow these standards. The Act does not, though, direct VDOE to take any meaningful actions to monitor or ensure the quality of the program's implementation. VDOE is not required to facilitate individualized professional development or provide support to programs most in need of technical assistance. Consequently, and in part because of limited staffing resources, VDOE mostly defers to local school divisions to design, implement, and assess their own VPI programs. Ensuring that VPI provides a quality pre-K experience statewide will require VDOE to take a more meaningful role moving forward.

Child care subsidy includes few features to promote or incentivize high-quality child care

Like many child care programs nationwide, Virginia's Child Care Subsidy Program was initially created to enable parents to maintain employment, obtain an education, or receive training. However, the federal government and states, including Virginia, increasingly recognize the potential of using child care subsidies to promote healthy brain and skills development in young children, and many are taking action to improve the quality of child care supported through public funds.

Virginia's Child Care Subsidy Program has only recently added a goal to promote brain and skills development in young children through improvements to the quality of child care. Therefore, it is not surprising that most subsidy policies and the state's monitoring activities still focus primarily on compliance with state health and safety standards rather than the quality of children's experiences in subsidized child care settings.

Improving program quality usually involves additional costs for curriculum materials, training, and higher staff salaries. Current subsidy reimbursement rates are likely too low to incentivize child care providers to spend additional resources to improve the quality of experiences they provide to children. Several other states offer higher subsidies to providers that demonstrate higher levels of quality, with the quality level determined through assessments using state quality rating and improvement systems.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act programs are mostly effective at improving skills, but data needs improvement

The state's two Individuals with Disabilities Education Act programs intended to improve the skills of young children with disabilities can generally demonstrate they are effective. Nearly all children in the Early Childhood Special Education program demonstrated improvement in their social-emotional, cognitive, and self-care skills (92 percent, 94 percent, and 92 percent, respectively). A smaller proportion, but still a majority, of children in the Early Intervention program improved their skills (64 percent, 68 percent, and 71 percent, respectively). Evidence suggests, though, that the validity of scores could be improved for both programs, including a portion of local practitioners reporting that they did not fully understand the definitions of the skill categories used to assess children's progress.

Opportunities exist to improve Virginia's early childhood development programs

This report includes recommendations and options to improve the design, quality, and performance of the state's early childhood development programs. Many of the recommendations would require no additional appropriations by the General Assembly, and several others would require less than \$250,000. The remaining recommendations and options, however, would likely require some additional one-time or annual appropriations to implement.

To fund these improvements to early childhood development programs, the state could eliminate a minimally effective child care tax deduction. Virginia's Child and Dependent Care Expenses Tax Deduction was created in 1977 to help parents maintain full-time employment by reducing the cost of child care. Virginia's deduction is a separate tax incentive from the nonrefundable federal Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, which can be as much as \$1,050 for one child and \$2,100 for two or more children.

Despite the substantial financial commitment that the state makes to the deduction (\$28.9 million per year), the benefit to individual Virginia families (\$141 per year, on average) is too low to have much effect on parents' ability to afford child care and maintain full-time employment—the purpose of the deduction. Placed in context, the \$141 average reduction in annual tax liability would cover only about one percent of the annual average cost of child care—or less than one week of care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Require more comprehensive assessments of kindergarten readiness and more useful data about children at risk for poor developmental outcomes.
- Improve the design, quality, and performance data of early childhood programs to ensure efficient and effective use of funds.
- Require and provide sufficient resources for the Virginia Department of Education to have a more meaningful role in ensuring the quality of VPI implementation.

OPTIONS

- Implement a pilot program to provide higher child care subsidy reimbursement rates for providers that demonstrate higher quality care.
- Eliminate the minimally effective state tax deduction for child care, and use funding to improve (or potentially expand) programs that serve the youngest children at risk of poor developmental outcomes.

The complete list of recommendations and options is available on page v.