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Transforming State Early Childhood Governance

A Case Study

VIRGINIA



Executive Summary

Strategies for governing and administering early childhood programs and services at the state level affect parents' awareness of, access to, and experience with vital services for their families. No consensus exists on the optimal governance structures for early childhood, which underscores the need for additional research on best practices for state-level early childhood governance.



To understand the full range of state early childhood governance strategies, the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center at Vanderbilt University (Policy Impact Center) conducted a national landscape scan to identify each state's strategy for organizing the administration of a broad range of early childhood programs and services. The Policy Impact Center then selected states with various governance styles for in-depth case studies. This brief presents the case study results for Virginia.

In 2021, Virginia consolidated its out-of-home early childhood education services under one division, the Division of Early Childhood Care and Education (DECCE), within the Department of Education. At the same time, Virginia created and implemented a robust, unified early education data system to inform funding and programmatic choices. In the years that followed, ongoing bipartisan support helped solidify the unified early education governance structure, fostering growth to meet the needs of families.

Virginia's strategic elevation of early education offers key lessons learned:

- Virginia leaders pursued governance change to improve school readiness.
- The culmination of years of work to strengthen early education in Virginia using a public-private approach laid the foundation for governance change.
- Governance changes were enacted through legislative actions, which created greater sustainability for early education initiatives.
- Implementing a robust, uniform data system provides a comprehensive understanding of early childhood experiences across the state, which allows leaders to maximize funding to improve programs and services.
- Effective allocation of federal and state funding strengthens Virginia's early childhood education system.
- Virginia leaders seek input from a diverse set of perspectives, ensuring early childhood education initiatives continue to be driven by the voiced needs of the community.
- Regional hubs provide supports, facilitate collaboration, and streamline communication for local early childhood leaders.

Introduction

Across the United States, state approaches to organizing the administration of programs and services for young children and their families vary widely. Some states consolidate governance of early childhood programs into relatively few agencies and departments. Other states disperse early childhood programs across numerous state government entities. States also make different choices on which services to group together within an office or division, and the types of departments where a given service lives. These governance choices may reflect states' conception of and goals for early childhood.

Research to date, however, does not identify the optimal governance structure for early childhood programs to maximize effectiveness or efficiency of service provision. Existing resources also do not comprehensively document how state governance choices are similar to or different from one another.

The Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center at Vanderbilt University (Policy Impact Center) conducted a study of early childhood governance in the US. The study includes a [comprehensive national landscape scan](#) of early childhood governance and case studies of selected states with different early childhood governance strategies. Through the study, we identify patterns in early childhood governance; examine the benefits and challenges of different governance strategies; and identify best practices and lessons learned from states to inform effective and efficient early childhood governance.

This brief provides the case study findings for Virginia. For the case study, we interviewed 11 early childhood leaders in Virginia representing state government, child care business owners, health care providers, non-profits, and advocates. Our findings summarize what we learned through these interviews.

Early Childhood Governance in Virginia

Governance Structure

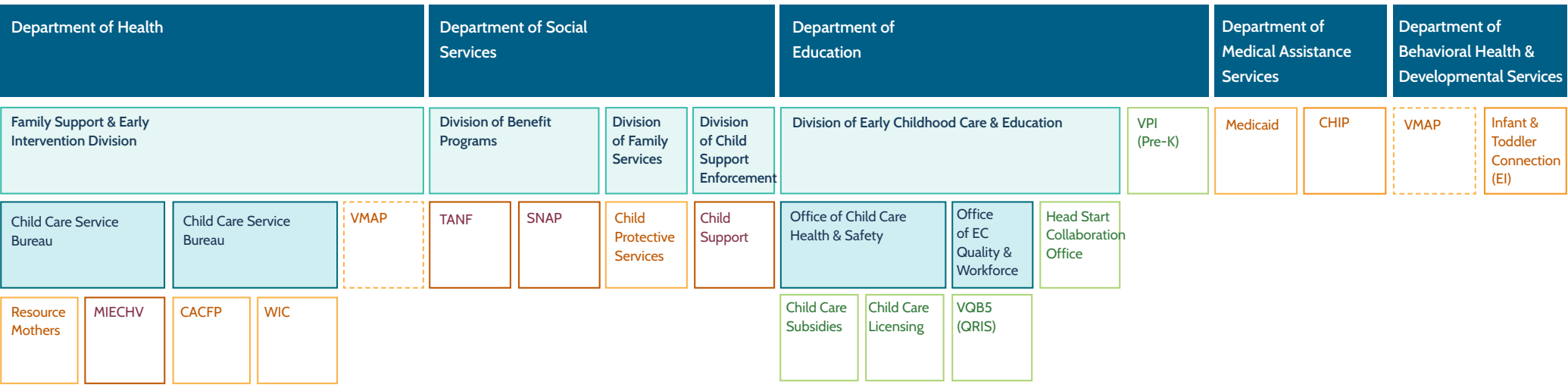
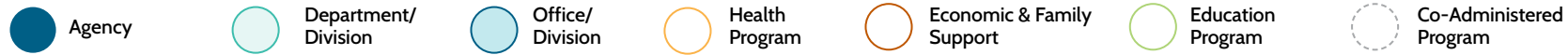
For our study, we considered all education, health, and economic programs administered by the state that benefit families with children prenatal to age 3. In Virginia, we found early childhood programs are housed across five departments, with programs housed primarily in either the Department of Health, Department of Social Services, or Department of Education (see Figure 1). Figure 1 represents the results of the consolidation of early childhood programs in 2021 (more information on consolidation below).

Each of the three departments offering the largest number of programs for young children and families in Virginia provides distinct support. The Department of Health provides multiple early childhood health programs, including home visiting, nutrition programs (WIC and CACFP), prenatal care (Resource Mothers), and mental health services (VMAP). The Department of Human Services administers economic

and family support services such as TANF, SNAP, child protective services, and child support. Finally, the Department of Education has a range of educational programming for families with young children, including child care subsidies, child care licensing, child care quality ratings (VQB5), pre-Kindergarten (VPI), and the Head Start State Collaboration Office. The Department of Medical Assistance Services and the Department of Behavioral Health and Development Services also provide relevant services for families with young children in Virginia.

The Division of Early Childhood Care and Education (DECCE) within the Department of Education houses most early education programs. DECCE is led by the Deputy Superintendent of Early Childhood Care and Education, a permanent position currently held by Jenna Conway.

Figure 1. Virginia Governance Chart



History of Virginia's Early Childhood Governance Structure

The consolidation of early education programs in Virginia was the result of 20 years of work by a diverse set of leaders to improve school readiness. From the start, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) was instrumental in building a statewide early education system by engaging in an “inside-outside” approach; specifically, VECF leveraged the strengths of the private sector while partnering closely with government leaders in the public sector to build support.

To this end, VECF's Smart Beginnings, launched in 2005, fostered local public-private partnerships to improve school readiness in 17 communities, serving approximately 80 percent of children and families in Virginia. Smart Beginnings initiatives raised public awareness, facilitated coalition building, and created opportunities for community service providers to share knowledge and resources.¹ VECF also centered quality of care through their Virginia Quality initiative, a voluntary quality rating and improvement system launched in 2008.²



At the same time VECF fostered early education innovations across the state, the conversation around early childhood was also evolving. Beginning in the 2010s, emerging research on the brain science of early childhood emphasized the critical importance of children's earliest years. This research further strengthened advocates' call (including VECF) to create an early education system that supported children from birth to age 5.

Yet, the conversation in Virginia remained largely centered on 4-year-old pre-K services. For example, Delegate Tag Greason (R) championed the Mixed Delivery grant initiative, which authorized VECF to provide public funding for children in private, community-based pre-K classrooms. The Mixed Delivery grants, launched in 2017, complement the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), the state-funded pre-K program in public school districts, to further increase access to public pre-K.²

At the same time, the School Readiness Committee, through legislation sponsored by Delegate Greason, convened to address the development and alignment of a professional development and credentialing system for the early education workforce. As part of this work, a subcommittee on governance examined the current governance structure and made recommendations on alternative governance models. The subcommittee's work provided the foundation for future governance change in the state.

The 2017 gubernatorial election was won by then Lieutenant Governor Ralph Northam (D). Recognizing the importance of early childhood, the Northam administration undertook several key steps to center Virginia's youngest children in the conversation. First, he appointed Jenna Conway, who was key in transforming Louisiana's early childhood system, as the Chief School Readiness Officer for Virginia.

Governor Northam also reconvened the Children's Cabinet through Executive Directive 11, chaired by First Lady Pamela Northam; the Cabinet was charged with improving school readiness, access to nutrition, school safety, and coordination of services. Finally, in fall of 2018, First Lady Northam initiated a "Back-to-School" listening tour of early childhood programs and elementary schools with the Chief School Readiness Officer.³

Building on growing interest and awareness, legislation was proposed during the 2019 General Assembly session (the Early Childhood Success Act) to unify and improve Virginia's early education governance structure; despite bipartisan sponsorship, the bill failed to progress.

In the same year, Governor Northam further strengthened his commitment to early childhood by issuing Executive Directive 4, which established the Executive Leadership Team on School Readiness (the “Team”). The Team was tasked with making “recommendations that unify and strengthen the early childhood system to ensure all Virginia children have equal opportunities to enter school ready to succeed.”⁴

The Team had multiple workgroups to address school readiness from various perspectives, and members focused on the voiced needs of parents and sought to learn from other states. The Team supported a mixed delivery approachⁱ to achieve school readiness, meaning publicly funded child care and pre-K could be offered through a variety of settings (e.g., school districts, child care centers, family child care, private schools, etc.); pursuing a mixed delivery approach was critical for gaining buy-in from members concerned with program funding and stability.

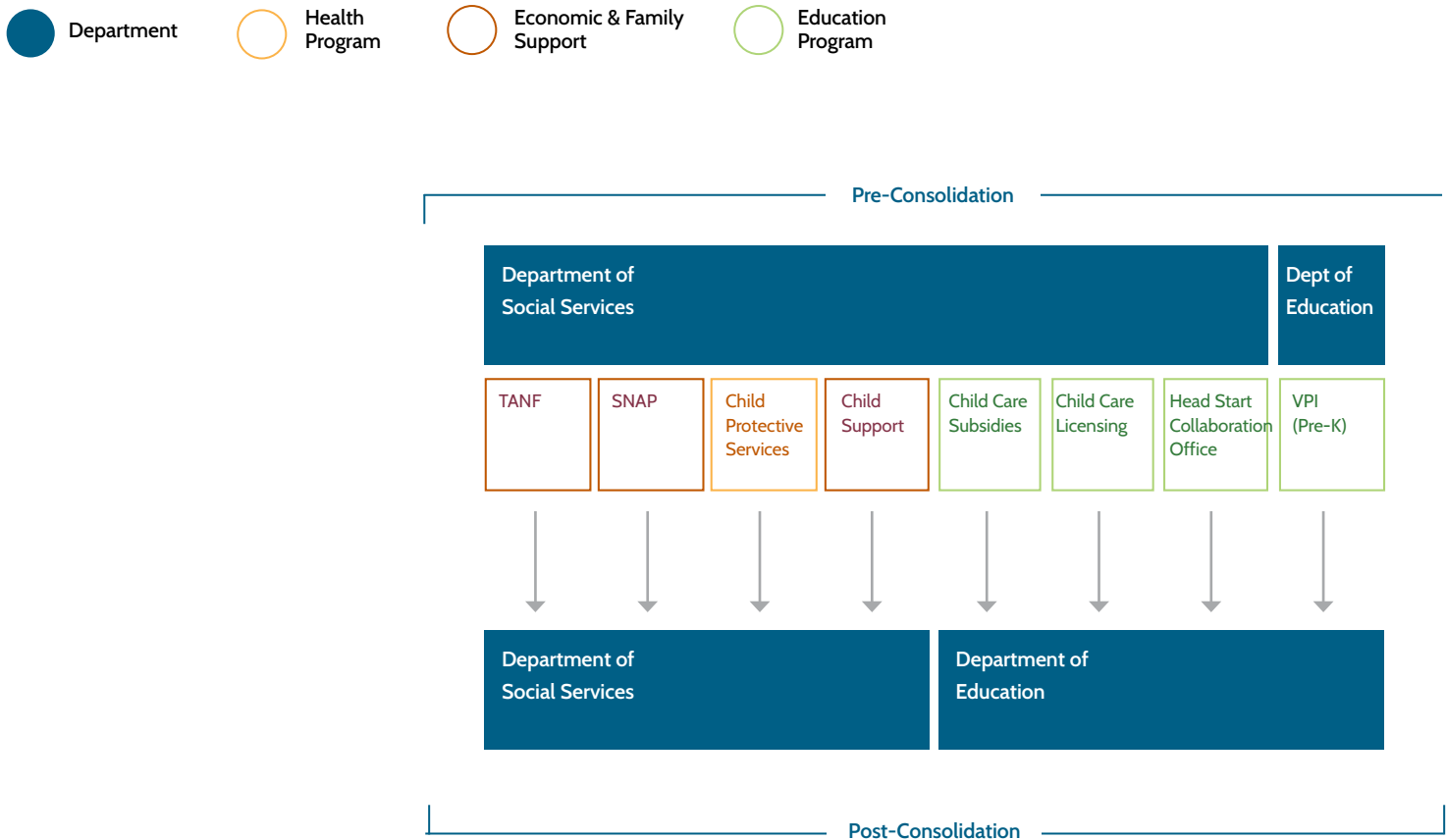
The Executive Leadership Team generated three key recommendations: 1) maximize access for at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds; 2) build a uniform measurement and improvement system; and 3) consolidate state oversight and administration of early childhood care and education systems.⁵

In 2020, Democrats, now holding both chambers and the governor’s office, proposed legislation for a consolidated, data-driven early education system. With bipartisan support, the Virginia General Assembly passed the School Readiness Act, which directed the Board of Education to establish a unified public-private system for early childhood education under the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). The law required that all oversight for early childhood education programs was within VDOE, an early childhood advisory council was established, and a uniform data system was created.⁶

In the consolidation, child care subsidies, child care licensing, and the Head Start State Collaboration Office all moved from the Department of Social Services into the Division of Early Childhood Care and Education (DECCE) within VDOE. Leaders intentionally decided to focus the consolidation on out-of-home care and so did not pursue consolidation of Early Intervention (Part C) services or home visiting services (MIECHV).

ⁱ A “mixed delivery approach” refers to the concept of care offered in a variety of settings. This is related to but distinct from “Mixed Delivery grants,” a program offered by VECF which provides public funding for children in private, community-based pre-K.

Figure 2. Programmatic Shifts during Governance Consolidation



Notes. The Dept. of Health, Dept. of Medical Assistance Services, and Dept. of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services are not represented, as they were unaffected by the consolidation.

The structural shift was largely well-received by child care providers, although some providers expressed concern that licensing standards may no longer reflect the infant or toddler experience (given the historic focus on 4-year-old pre-K).

The establishment of a new division in VDOE also allowed for more permanent early education leadership. Jenna Conway, previously serving as the Chief School Readiness Officer at the pleasure of the governor, transitioned into the Deputy Superintendent role for DECCE.

During the transition period, the Deputy Superintendent for DECCE and VDOE worked closely with leadership at the Department of Social Services (DSS). First Lady Northam was instrumental in the smooth transition, positioning DSS leadership as valued partners throughout the process.

Recognizing funding streams would also be shifting from DSS to VDOE, department leaders worked closely to allocate COVID-19 pandemic relief funding and Child Care and Development Block Grant funds during the transition. Additionally, VECF was a key partner in distributing the dollars quickly at the local level. These partnerships were critical for positioning DECCE as the new authority on out-of-home early education.

As noted above, the legislation also required the establishment of an early childhood advisory council (ECAC). The ECAC was established in January 2021, with 22 members serving 3-year terms.⁷ ECAC members do not vote but can endorse various recommendations, and the Deputy Superintendent for DECCE acts as the department liaison. In its first 3 years, ECAC members took up issues of teacher-child interactions and access and affordability of care; for example, members suggested revisions to program licensing to minimize barriers to participation while maintaining rigorous health and safety standards.

Finally, legislation required a uniform data system to be created. Known as the Unified Virginia Quality Birth to Five System (VQB5), the system measures and helps improve quality for all publicly funded early childhood education classroom; notably, Virginia is the only state with such a robust system to regularly assess quality in every classroom.

By leveraging a regulation in the Head Start performance standards, state leaders ensured both state-funded programs and federally funded Head Start programs would be required to participate in VQB5 (the Head Start regulation has since been rolled back). To ensure providers would have adequate time to meet the new standards, the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years were “practice” years (meaning ratings were not made public).

At the same time, the state was conducting a voluntary pilot of the Virginia Kindergarten Readiness assessment in 4-year-old classrooms. By 2022, all publicly funded pre-K classrooms (i.e., VPI and Mixed Delivery grants) serving 3- and 4-year-olds were using the assessment to evaluate early mathematics and social skills.⁸ With a standard assessment system, student progress can be tracked from pre-K through 12th grade.

In addition to the governance change, in 2020 the Virginia General Assembly also passed legislation to establish Ready Regions. Ready Regions, managed by VECF and working closely with VDOE, represented the evolution of the Smart Beginnings network. The Smart Beginnings network illustrated the value of the regional approach, but certain areas, especially rural communities, struggled to sustain the work as funding dwindled.

The rollout of Ready Regions, supported by VECF, established nine regions; many organizations created through Smart Beginnings became the natural hub for their Ready Region. The initiative was piloted using federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five dollars and is now funded using federal Child Care and Development Block Grant funds.

The Division of Early Childhood Care and Education was officially launched on July 1, 2021; Ready Regions were launched 1 year later on July 1, 2022. These monumental shifts in Virginia's early childhood landscape have ushered in a true mixed delivery system serving children birth to age 5.

Early childhood education continues to be a bipartisan issue in the state. After consolidation, legislators created the Commission on Early Childhood Care and Education and charged the group with providing recommendations on the financing of a birth to five system. In 2024, under the leadership of Governor Youngkin (R) and based on the recommendation of the Committee, the General Assembly passed historic investments in early childhood education with bipartisan support. A total of \$1.1 billion was allocated to early care and education services over the next 2 years (FY2025-2026). Additional changes, such as ensuring funding follows children and funding is maximized, have continued to strengthen the early education system to meet the needs of families.

Lessons Learned

Virginia leaders pursued governance change to improve school readiness.

From the start, Virginia leaders understood improved school readiness as the goal of any changes to the early education system. Improving school readiness was already central to numerous efforts led by VECF, such as Smart Beginnings, Virginia Quality, and Mixed Delivery grants. Additionally, building on the shared goal of school readiness, key leaders like Kathy Glazer (who directs VECF) and Jenna Conway (who leads DECCE) were instrumental in expanding the school readiness conversation from 4-year-old pre-K services to a birth to 5 early education system.

As such, governance consolidation and a statewide data system were always understood as opportunities to improve school readiness across a birth to 5 system. Governance and data changes were proposed together, as leaders recognized simply moving programs was not enough. By pairing consolidation with robust data systems, DECCE is positioned to maximize investments in early education through data-informed decision making that improves the efficiency and effectiveness of early education programming.

To garner support for the change, leaders focused messaging on fostering effective collaboration between a variety of child care providers. In recognizing that no single provider type could serve all children birth to age 5, leaders promoted a consolidated governance structure as ideal for enhancing collaboration in a mixed delivery system. Critically, leaders also decided early in the process that consolidation efforts would be focused on out-of-home care and education programs.

The choice to consolidate education programs was widely seen as positive by interviewees. Some interviewees, however, expressed the need to consider children's experiences holistically to more effectively improve school readiness and address the complex needs of families. Furthermore, the narrow scope adopted by DECCE limits opportunities for collaboration with other education, health, or economic programs serving the same population.

The culmination of years of work to strengthen early education in Virginia using a public-private approach laid the foundation for governance change.

Early childhood governance change was the product of over 20 years of work to strengthen early education systems in Virginia; VECF led advocacy efforts throughout this time, engaging with legislators across the aisle to gain support for various early education initiatives. The public-private approach also allowed state leaders at VECF and DECCE to lean into the strengths of both the public and private sectors to implement innovative solutions throughout this period.

The growing support for early childhood was capitalized on during the Northam administration; his election in 2017 provided multiple opportunities for state leaders to champion early education. Specifically, hiring a Chief School Readiness Officer, the Back-to-School listening tour, the Children's Cabinet, and the School Readiness Team all created dedicated roles and spaces in the state government focused on early childhood.

These efforts culminated in the passage of a consolidated early childhood education system; this occurred while the governor's party controlled both chambers, but nonetheless received bipartisan support, particularly in the House.

Governance changes were enacted through legislative actions, creating greater sustainability for early education initiatives.

State leaders recognized early on that changes to the early childhood landscape must be codified in law to ensure sustainability. Specifically, although the Northam administration had the authority to consolidate early education programs through executive order, it was unclear whether future governors would uphold this change; this concern was especially pertinent given Virginia governors may not serve two consecutive terms. As such, interviewees recognized the passage of the legislation as a significant win for early education in the state.

Similarly, multiple interviewees recognized the value of a permanent Deputy Superintendent for DECCE established in 2021. The permanent position minimizes disruptions and lends credibility to early education initiatives; for example, Jenna Conway has successfully worked under multiple VDOE Superintendents and two administrations from opposing political parties.

Implementing a robust, uniform data system provides a comprehensive understanding of early childhood experiences across the state, which allows leaders to maximize funding to improve programs and services.

As mentioned above, the efforts to consolidate early education programming in Virginia were done in tandem with the establishment of a uniform, comprehensive data system. As part of the 2020 legislation, the VQB5 data system was created and has been fully implemented since 2023.

Because of Virginia's regional approach to early childhood, DECCE leverages regional structures to ensure every publicly funded classroom is evaluated under the new system. The uniform data from every classroom allows leaders at DECCE to have a comprehensive understanding of early childhood education programs in all parts of the state. Interviewees recognized that the robust data increases accountability in the early education system, allowing DECCE to demonstrate state and federal dollars are being spent effectively.

Multiple interviewees agree that the overall quality of care has increased because of VQB5. Some interviewees, however, noted that child care providers, especially small providers, may find the administration of assessments burdensome. Other interviewees appreciated the educational certifications teachers are required to have under VQB5, but felt additional funding was also necessary to compensate teachers for their expertise.

Outside of DECCE, other programs serving young children and their families maintain their own data systems. Multiple interviewees acknowledged the continuing opportunity to share data across education, health, and economic services to better capture the holistic experience of children and families.

Effective allocation of federal and state funding strengthens Virginia's early childhood education system.

In addition to creating robust governance and data structures, multiple interviewees acknowledge various funding choices that further strengthens early education in Virginia. Even before DECCE was launched, VDOE worked closely with DSS leadership, the recipient of federal funds, to ensure pandemic relief funds and Child Care and Development Block Grant funds were used effectively. For example, pandemic relief funds were used to increase teacher compensation and eliminate the child care subsidy waitlist. VECF also played a critical role by quickly distributing funds at the local level.

Since DECCE launched, the state has revised requirements to receive funding to ensure all child care providers can be supported in the birth to 5 system. Furthermore, VECF continues to offer Mixed Delivery grants, which provides public funding to increase access to private, community-based pre-K classrooms. Both initiatives stabilize the child care workforce while providing financial relief to families.

Ready Regions also leverage federal dollars effectively. Piloted using Preschool Development Grant dollars, now the program is funded by federal Child Care and Development Block Grant funds. Interviewees understood dedicated federal funding, rather than relying on state funds, as critical to Ready Regions' sustainability.

Most recently, legislative changes revised a rule stating that unused funds allocated to early childhood education and care would be returned to the general fund. Instead, the funds can now be redistributed within early education programs to decrease waitlists and increase slots in counties with the greatest need. Interviewees felt this change was especially critical given the significant waitlists that accrued after pandemic relief funding ended.

Throughout all these changes, interviewees emphasized that simply increasing funding would not solve the problem. The creation of a consolidated early education structure in Virginia was critical for both the passage of increased funding and the implementation of innovative funding solutions.

Virginia leaders seek input from a diverse set of perspectives, ensuring early childhood education initiatives continue to be driven by the voiced needs of the community.

Multiple interviewees praised Jenna Conway for her leadership style; specifically, various leaders highlighted how they felt their input was truly valued and could point to changes based on their feedback. Interviewees felt the active listening by DECCE leadership helped to effectively resolve concerns of various provider types as the mixed delivery system was implemented.

The focus on community needs also led DECCE to make several decisions to promote access and inclusion for all child care providers. For example, free curriculum was made available to providers, and a 2-year “practice” period was implemented before VQB5 ratings became public. These choices, while simple, ensured providers were set up for success in the new consolidated system.

Even now, leaders continue to respond to voiced challenges. Most recently, opportunities to reduce administrative burdens for providers, particularly rural providers, participating in the subsidy system have been discussed. Additionally, leaders continued to address the ongoing challenge to increase the supply of child care slots.

Community voice is also uplifted in the multitude of workgroups, boards, and councils for early childhood education. The Early Childhood Advisory Council, for example, brings together a diverse set of public- and private-child care providers, parents, and advocates. Groups also exist for specific interests; the Virginia Business Roundtable for Early Education, hosted by VECF, is a space for business executives, business chamber members, and economic development agencies to come together and discuss Virginia’s early education system.

The intentional inclusion of a variety of state leaders fosters bipartisan support, as leaders representing various constituencies recognize the importance of and are actively involved in improving the early education system. Furthermore, leaders from a broad range of sectors are well positioned to tailor early education messaging to their peers and may act as trusted sources outside of government.

Regional hubs provide supports, facilitate collaboration, and streamline communication for local early childhood leaders.

Interviewees stated that Virginia takes a regional approach on many issues, including early education. Twenty years ago, VECF established Smart Beginnings to support regional collaboration; in the last 5 years, Ready Regions have replaced Smart Beginnings. Many interviewees credited Ready Regions for providing professional development for and collecting data from child care providers.

Ready Regions also facilitate collaboration amongst local leaders; for example, some regions are now working to implement coordinated enrollment systems within their region. Interviewees felt, however, that opportunities still exist to enhance collaboration between child care providers and school districts serving preschoolers; similarly, a desire for Ready Regions to collaborate with other local or regional entities offering non-education programs and services for young children and their families was expressed.

Ready Regions also support streamlined communication, increasing understanding of state-level initiatives at the local level while also raising local issues to state leaders. As mentioned above, the diversity of perspective included in various workgroups also serves to align messaging between local, regional, and state leaders. This is particularly critical in the Virginia landscape, because the conception of early childhood may vary across regions.

Although interviewees noted that the effectiveness of the Ready Region depends on regional leadership, most interviewees agreed that the regional approach was essential to an effective early education system in Virginia.

Conclusion

States approach early childhood governance in a variety of ways, and these choices can impact parents' awareness of, access to, and experience with early childhood programs and services. Yet research to date provides little guidance on best practices of early childhood governance.

This work begins to address the gap in knowledge about optimal early childhood governance by considering the benefits and challenges of the new consolidated governance structure in Virginia. Interviews with key leaders highlighted the longstanding goal of improving school readiness in the state, culminating in the consolidation of early education programming and implementation of a unified data system. Community leaders, headed by VECF, in combination with state leaders at DECCE and the governor's office, were able to capitalize on the unified state government in 2018 to codify systemic change.

Since the consolidation of early education programs, DECCE has continued to prioritize community voice, leverage regional partnerships, and maximize investments in early education. In short, Virginia has transformed its early education system to be more effective and efficient, and state leaders continue to pursue initiatives to further strengthen the system.

Although each state has a unique context, these best practices and lessons learned in Virginia can benefit leaders in other states working to craft more effective and efficient early childhood governance systems.



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