

# Upskilling Virginia’s Early Learning Workforce

Hosted by the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and the Virginia Chamber of Commerce

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**Introduction and Context.** There is growing recognition that school readiness is linked to workforce readiness.

The most important factor in school success and learning outcomes for young children is the capabilities of the adults who support their growth and learning.

Brain research over the last 20 years has promoted recognition of:

- the importance of the birth to five span of time for learning,
- our understanding of the way young children develop, and
- identification of the specific knowledge, skills, and competencies that are needed for early childhood teachers to be effective in supporting the optimal growth and learning of very young children.

We now know that some of our structures and systems that set standards and requirements for teacher education and training (like licensing for child care programs through social services and licensure for teachers in public schools) that have been established over decades do not reflect the new knowledge that we have about effective teaching and learning for young children. At the same time, these structures and systems are bifurcated; there is one set of standards and supports for those teaching in private settings (usually under the purview of the Virginia Department of Social Services and its responsibilities for the licensing and regulation of child care programs and providers) and those teaching in public settings (under the purview of the Virginia Department of Education and its responsibilities for oversight of public schools and teacher licensure). These agencies have very different philosophies, mandates, and practices, yet both have the same ultimate responsibilities and commitment to ensure that young children (especially those at risk) have opportunities to start school ready to learn and succeed.

A four-year-old has different learning needs from a 4<sup>th</sup> grader. While in the past, our structures have promoted notions that providing care and education for a 3- or four-year-old required a lower skill set than teaching a 4<sup>th</sup> grader (babysitting mentality, lower bar of requirements, lower pay scale); we now know that the skills and competencies are different, but no less distinctive and important.

A four-year-old learning in a regulated child care center has the same learning needs as a four-year-old in a school based preschool classroom. The school readiness needs for each of these four-year-olds is the same; the opportunity for effective teaching and learning should be as well.

Unlike the K-12 system, there are many different options for parents in choosing care and early learning arrangements for their young children birth to age five, resulting in a rich diversity in the workforce. The variation in settings can be viewed across a continuum that for practical purposes, we’ll call informal to formal (see **Figure 1**). The graphic also provides an indication of where private dollars (parent tuition) and public dollars are typically involved. The red box outlines the specific set of school readiness services and teachers that we’ll focus on during the initial discussion. These are classrooms where the expectation is that young children are learning “full time” – or at least on school year schedules. These are also settings where frequently, public dollars are being utilized for the services – either through child care subsidies, Head Start, or state funded preschool.

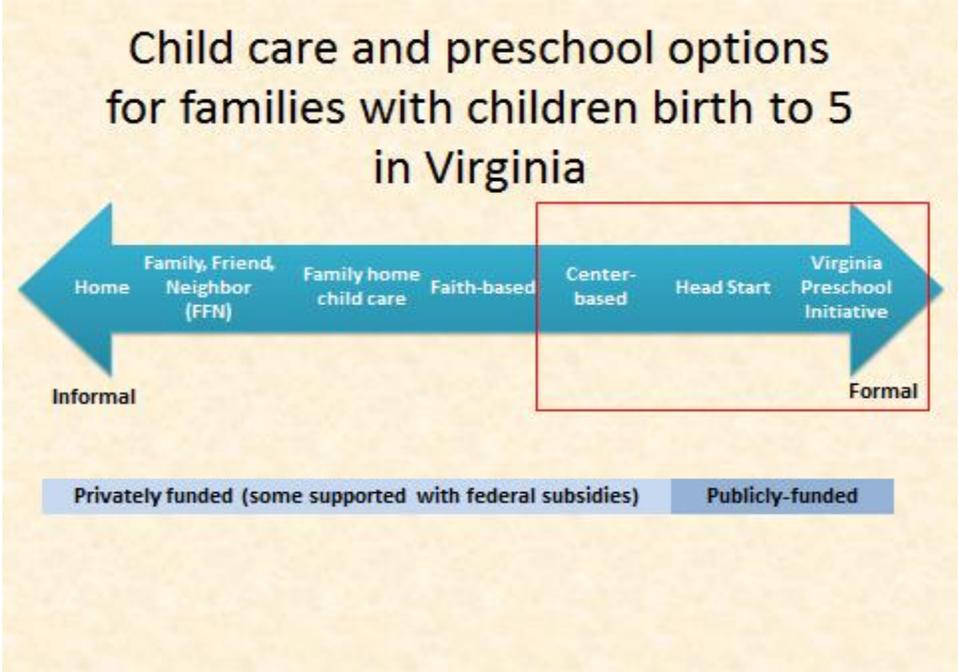


Figure 1.

**The Virginia Landscape.** While it is difficult to get accurate and unduplicated data, **Figure 2** provides an estimate of where children from birth to age five spend their learning days in Virginia. Often, our discussions about effective teaching and learning is centered on VPI, but it’s a small slice of where the majority of our roughly half a million children under age five are learning. Between 60-70% of children in this age group have all parents working, from which we infer that approximately 390,000 children under five are in some kind of care or preschool arrangement.

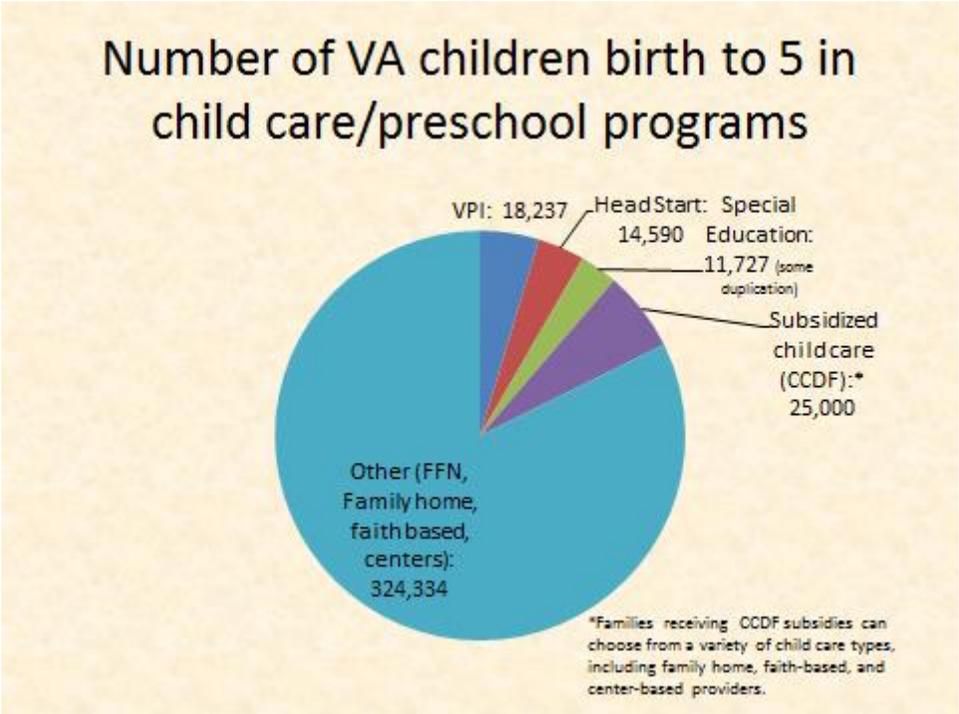


Figure 2.

Remembering the red box and our particular area of initial focus in **Figure 1**, we get a sense from **Figure 3** of the broad range in requirements for the adults leading these classrooms – that key factor for school readiness success – across three different settings. In terms of preservice requirements, in regulated child care, the teacher must be a high school completer; for Head Start, a two-year degree is required; for VPI, a baccalaureate degree and a teacher license are required. A four-year-old in any of these three settings may have very different experiences. In-service requirements are: 24 hours for a center teacher, and 15 hours for Head Start and VPI teachers.

Minimum education and training requirements by child care or preschool program type			
	Licensed child care centers	Head Start	Virginia Preschool Initiative
Minimum education (pre-service) requirements	HS completion plus 6 months classroom experience OR HS completion plus 24 hours of training related to child care	2 year degree in early childhood education or related coursework*	<u>School setting:</u> BA/BS degree and teacher license (preK-3, preK-6) <u>Private care setting:</u> Not addressed in VPI requirements; default to Code for public schools.
Minimum annual training (in-service) requirements	24 hours per year	15 hours per year	15 hours per year

\*Federal law set a goal (not requirement) for Head Start to have 50% of teachers with a BA degree by 2013.

**Figure 3.**

These minimum standards set the bar (provide the “frame”) for the individuals with the responsibility of leading classrooms and guiding the school readiness experiences for many thousands of young children in Virginia. But they don’t necessarily tell us much about what kind of preparation or ongoing skill-building (“inside the frame”) these professionals have had or continue to have.

During our discussion, we have the chance to explore challenges and barriers that are relevant to both the **frame** and **what’s inside the frame**, to learn more about this important question:

- **What does the professional development pathway look like for these individuals? (frame and inside the frame)**

Finally, we’ll discuss potential solutions to some of the existing challenges, as we begin to envision and plan for a smoother pathway to support skill-building for this critically important workforce.

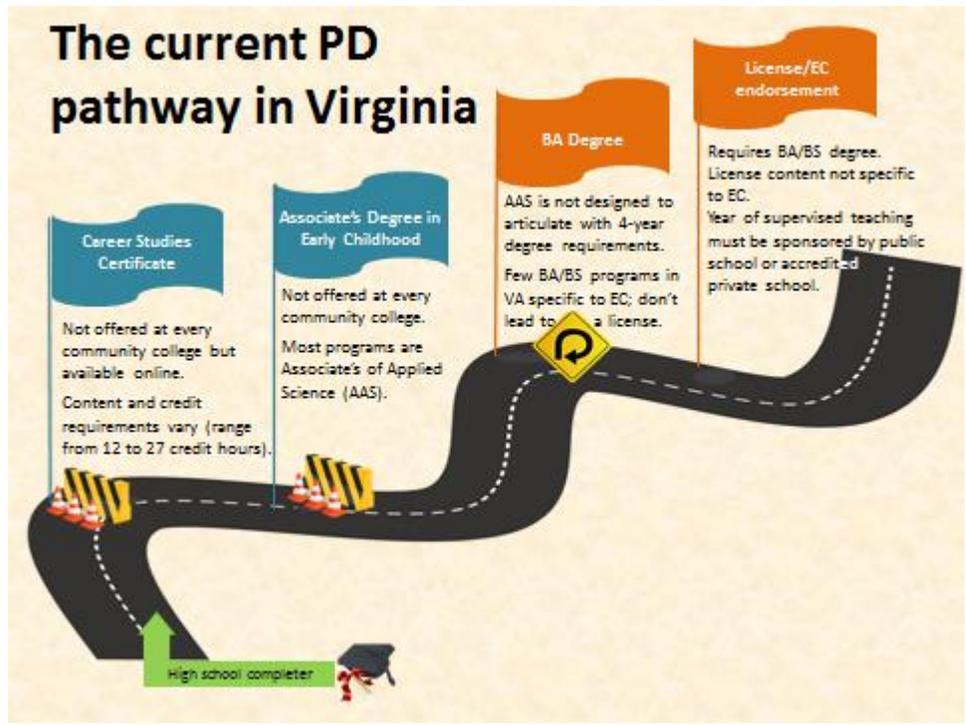


Figure 4.

**The Roadblocks in Virginia’s PD Pathway.** As **Figure 4** indicates, some of the barriers that have been mentioned in preparation for this discussion include the following. Please note this list is not exhaustive, but is a sampling of the barriers that exist along the way for early childhood practitioners wishing to move upward on a continuum of professional development and designation:

Affordability:

- For individuals who work as teachers in private settings, the going rate of pay is much lower than the salaries of teachers in public schools. While these individuals may wish to build their skills by taking college coursework or achieving certificates, endorsements, and specializations, the cost of college-level coursework can be prohibitive.
- There are a number of existing funding streams for professional development that could be put to more efficient use toward more cohesive, coordinated professional development outcomes.

Access:

- For individuals who work in child care year ‘round, the difficulty with leaving their post to attend trainings or to study during the “business day” can limit their options. In order to meet their annual training requirements, these practitioners may be inclined to choose “one-shot” workshops offered at times that suit their work schedules. While this may help them meet their required clock hours, this type of professional development does not support strong, sequential skill-building nor does it lead to a certificate or designation that signals a professional achievement for the practitioner.

Articulation:

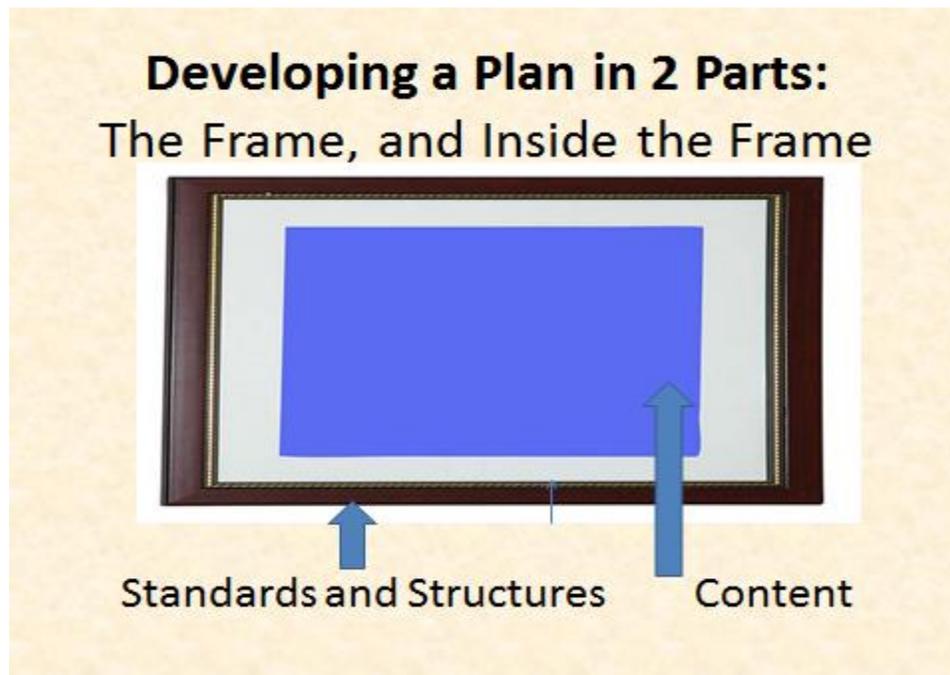
- The most content-rich Associate Degrees offered at community colleges are in Applied Sciences (AAS); AAS degrees are not designed to articulate to a baccalaureate program. Students with an AAS degree wishing to transfer those credits to a baccalaureate program learn that they must complete the equivalent of another year’s worth of coursework for their credits to transfer.

Availability:

- Some, but not all, of Virginia’s community colleges offer early childhood certificates and programs. For those that do, the intention is for the early childhood coursework to be consistent across the colleges, but this consistency hasn’t yet been completely achieved.
- Very few of Virginia’s institutions of higher education offer baccalaureate degrees specific to early childhood development. Those that do, do not lead to a teaching license. It is our understanding that this predicament stems from board of education concerns dating back to 1988 that at the time there was not an appropriate proportion of pedagogy vs. content in Virginia’s baccalaureate programs in education. These concerns resulted in a move away from content specificity toward more general liberal arts or multidisciplinary degree programs.
- Teaching licenses are intentionally designed to be broad to offer teachers and principals maximum flexibility for classroom placement. Yet at the same time they are not keenly attuned to the unique needs and development of young children. Even the pre K – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade license, which is an early childhood license, does not require content that is specific to the needs of young children.

Accountability:

- At one end of the Figure 3 continuum, the standards that have been set drive focus to the floor (low bar of competency) and at the other end of the continuum the standards drive to a ceiling that is disingenuous (doesn’t cultivate or translate into the specific skills related to teaching young children).
- Navigating the requirements and standards across sectors is challenging; information for the workforce is disparate and confusing.



**Figure 5.**

**Mapping Solutions.** As we map out a plan for addressing potential solutions to a high quality continuum of professional development opportunities and supports, we will ask questions and explore options for both “frame” and “inside the frame” solutions.

- What do we know about our current workforce?

- Is information readily and easily available for practitioners about what is required and expected for teaching in different settings?
- What kind of professional development (education, training, coaching, skill-building) opportunities exist for early learning practitioners in Virginia?
- Do the standards and structures currently in place reflect what we now know about the importance of the competencies of teachers of young children?
- Do current professional development opportunities offer teachers a clear, “stackable” continuum of designations and certifications that are available and affordable for these important practitioners?
- Is there high quality, available, and accessible content to support every practitioner’s development – at every stage of the continuum?
- What are Virginia’s priorities when it comes to this workforce?
- Who has the power to make important changes and improvements?

In order to map out a coherent plan for a high quality, competency-based PD pathway, several conditions are needed:

- Collective problem-solving and agreement on the need for a plan by multiple stakeholder groups; development of a plan with cross-cutting accountability.
- A clear lead responsible for convening the relevant stakeholders, structuring the work, developing timelines, gathering the needed information and stakeholder feedback, and scheduling quarterly accountability checks.
- Readiness for disruptive change and motivation to achieve collectively-developed goals.

**Ideas for Actions.** Some ideas have emerged that may be steps toward a more cohesive pathway. These ideas that touch on both frame and inside-frame issues as well as additional suggestions will be explored among the cross-stakeholder group for consideration.

- More efficiently utilize existing funding streams for professional development.
- Given the research on low impact of one-time, short trainings, shift from requiring clock hours of training to continuing education units (CEUs) with more intensive competency-related content.
- Tier stackable certificates across a continuum of skill-building for all levels of mastery.
- Develop a system of micro-credentials tied to new professional development registry.
- Increase consistency across community college programs, certificates, coursework and credit hours.
- Consider NAEYC accreditation of coursework in community colleges.
- Improve articulation agreements from Associate degree programs to baccalaureate.
- Reinstate early childhood-specific baccalaureate degree.
- Revise relevant teacher licenses to better attend to competencies re very young children and/or establish a birth to age 8 license.
- Immediate need to identify appropriate criteria for teachers for VPI delivered in private settings.
- Phase in appropriate degree/credentialing requirements over time.
- Utilize QRIS to get teachers on pathway; offer incentives to make PD more affordable and accessible.
- Explore ideas tested in other states.

**Next Steps.** The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation has committed to convene a series of conversations, leading to recommendations and a plan for improved approaches and policies related to a high quality competency based professional development plan for Virginia’s early childhood workforce. Success will hinge on the engagement and persistence of all stakeholder groups convened for this discussion.