

The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) Program is the result of a 3-year study conducted by the VA Dept. of Education at the request of the General Assembly. The initiative was designed from the Head Start model to provide quality pre-K experiences for preschool children at risk of educational failure. Students must be four years old by September 30 of the current school year and must meet specific risk factor criteria as determined by the locale to be eligible for the program.

In 1995, Virginia Beach City Public Schools contracted the YMCA of South Hampton Roads to operate the VPI program. Three years later, in 1998, Chesapeake Public Schools followed suit by contracting with the YMCA of SHR and called their program, Early Adventures. The YMCA was a logical choice for this role, since the organization is the largest non-profit provider of quality child care in the nation, and here in the Commonwealth, serves 12,000 children daily.

Early Discoveries – now in its 13<sup>th</sup> year, and Early Adventures – currently in its 10<sup>th</sup>, together serve a total of more than 1,000 students each day in the two cities. Early Discoveries currently serves 704 students daily. However, were we fully funded, we could serve 1,206. Presently, we serve 58% of qualifying students not served by Head Start or Title 1. Like Early Discoveries, Early Adventures presently is serving 304 students each day – 53% of children not served by Title 1 or Head start – and a number which could grow to 567 when fully funded. The allocation per student across the Commonwealth is \$5,700.

Early Discoveries and Early Adventures serve preschoolers who are continuously exposed to high-risk factors and situations that are likely to have an adverse impact on their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Risk factors that are considered for eligibility purposes include, but are not limited to: economics (free/reduced lunch), single-parent families, unemployment, chronic illness, developmental delays, parents who have not finished high school, being foster children, or having grandparents as primary custodians (a figure which doubled in 10 years, from 8% to 16%), family stress and instabilities such as incarceration, drugs, violence, homelessness, and military deployment. Children are accepted by weighted risk factors. We are not a “first-come, first served” program.

Early Discoveries’ 44 classrooms are located at 14 elementary schools in Virginia Beach, while Early Adventures’ 19 can be found at 5 schools in Chesapeake. Most are located at Title 1 schools.

Both programs operate in portable classrooms supplied by the Y, with transportation and food services provided by the public school divisions. Our programs are full-day, and adhere to the public school division’s calendar.

Early Discoveries and Early Adventures are licensed by the Virginia Dept. of Social Services as child day programs. Each classroom serves no more than 16 students, with a teacher to student ratio of 1:8. Teachers must have a college degree, with a minimum of 30 credits in early childhood education, child development, elementary education or special education. Our

Assistant Teachers must have a high school diploma, but most have an Associate degree, or a CDA (Child Development Associate Credential). Our curricula, the *Creative Curriculum* and *Discoveries and Adventures*, are hands-on, research-based, developmentally-appropriate curricula for preschoolers. Our copyrighted *Discoveries and Adventures* curriculum has been aligned with the Virginia Foundation Blocks of Early Learning.

Students are assessed using PALS (Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening) Pre-K, the Developmental Continuum, progress reports, and learning profiles. Virginia Beach City Public Schools' Office of Accountability tracks our students' academic progress, and we share outcome measures with the principals and kindergarten teachers at each elementary school annually.

In addition, we employ a team of Family Involvement Specialists who work as counselors, social workers and liaisons. They have degrees in social work, psychology and/or counseling. The Family Involvement Specialists recruit our students, screen them for eligible risk factors, and serve as a resource and referral agent for our families. Family Involvement Specialist's responsibilities include, but are not limited to, conducting home visits, presenting parent education workshops, offering health screenings, transporting families to WIC and Social Services appointments, and coordinating school bus transportation services.

Primary components of Early Discoveries' and Early Adventures' school readiness approach include: effective parent-teacher communications, multiple home visits by teaching staff and Family Involvement Specialists, a requirement of 10 volunteer hours per family each year, monthly family events, and documentation of students' academic and social progress. We understand that the children most successful in school are those whose parents consider education important, and are actively involved with their children's education.

We know that our program is making a difference in children's success in school. We have countless testimonies from parents who come back to us after their children have moved onto "the big red schoolhouse" to thank us for making learning fun and truly getting their children "ready to learn". On their behalf, we thank you for your support, and look forward to it growing to meet the need in the years ahead.