



**Regional Response to Virginia Preschool Initiative Changes
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The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) has been one of the most significant improvements to our public school system in recent history. Not only has it prepared thousands of at-risk children for success in school, it has improved the overall quality of elementary education. In the most recent school year, 93% of children who participated in VPI met literacy benchmarks for Kindergarten, compared to 72% of children who did not attend preschool. (Source: VA Dept. of Education) This is what Kindergarten teachers have been reporting for years – pre-school makes successful Kindergartners. When a Kindergarten class has more children prepared to learn, the whole class learns more: more children learn to read on time; fewer children have disruptive behavior problems; and more students graduate from high school ready for life success.

Southwest Virginia communities and schools have recognized the value of VPI and have invested in the program to a greater extent than any other region of the state. In 2014, communities across the state used 71% of the VPI slots offered to them while Southwest Virginia schools used 97% of their available slots (Source: VA Kids Count). Public schools in Southwest Virginia have long recognized the value of investing in PreK education. Investing in PreK saves money long-term by reducing spending on special education, incarceration, and government support programs. In addition, there are long-term economic boosts of higher employment rates and earnings.

We recognize that this program is most valuable to low-income children and other children with major risk factors in their lives. Research has shown that low-income children and children from fragile family situations benefit most from quality pre-school. Our communities have worked hard to combine the resources of VPI and local Head Start programs to most effectively and efficiently serve a high percentage of these children.

We are afraid that the recent change in VPI eligibility criteria will force a step backward in the progress that has been made for young children in Southwest Virginia. We fear that fewer Southwest Virginia children will obtain the advantage of pre-school and some of the most at-risk children will lose the opportunity. This will be a tragedy for the individual children and their families, but it may prove to be an impediment to the economic improvement of our region.

Many school systems and Head Start programs in Southwest Virginia have expressed concerns about the new eligibility criteria for enrollment in VPI. They are concerned that the new language eliminates the ability of localities to set criteria that reflect the region's special needs and priorities. Specifically, the new eligibility requirements will:



1. Prevent the enrollment of children who are at high risk of school failure without the early intervention of preschool;
2. Create administrative barriers that will reduce the number of VPI classrooms and eligible children served, despite the availability of local funding and state allocated slots; and
3. Create unnecessary and counterproductive competition for children between VPI programs and Head Start programs.

Until this year, each school system was given the responsibility of developing the criteria to decide which children in their community were in greatest need of the program. School divisions used risk factors that included income, child's developmental level, and family risk factors. Children with the highest risk were given top priority in enrollment; children with less extreme or fewer risk factors were enrolled only after higher risk children.

The new policy limits enrollment to children who meet one of only four criteria:

“(i) family income at or below 200 percent of poverty, (ii) homelessness, (iii) student's parents or guardians are school dropouts, or (iv) family income is less than 350 percent of federal poverty guidelines in the case of students with special needs or disabilities.” (From VA Budget SEcion 136#14d.1)

On the surface, these criteria seem adequate and, for many communities across the state, they may be so. In Southwest Virginia, educators have noted gaps in the criteria that may keep high risk children out of VPI programs. Specifically:

- Many children in SWVA live with grandparents (or other relatives), often because of parental dysfunction that may have led to abuse or neglect. While the grandparents may have income slightly above the cut-off, these children are still in great need of high quality preschool.
- Children of incarcerated parents may have landed in a home with income above 200% but these children are at high risk.
- Teen parents (who may be living with their parents) may have graduated from high school but research has shown that their children continue to be at high risk.
- While the new criteria gives a higher income threshold for children with disabilities or special needs, it should be noted that the screening and service model used by VPI often discovers students who may need to be served with an IEP after admittance to the program for risk factors other than income. We fear that many of these children will not be served under the new system.

There are also practical, administrative problems with these new eligibility criteria that are especially difficult to manage for a rural school system. The most critical example: A school division may have one or two pre-school classrooms in each of its relatively small elementary schools. With the more restrictive criteria and reduced flexibility, the school may not be able to find enough of the highest risk children in that school's attendance area to fill a classroom. With a more flexible criteria, they could enroll at-risk children who may be above the income level. Without additional flexibility, they may be forced to reduce the number of classrooms and all children at that school could go unserved.



Some school systems are already preparing to eliminate a number of VPI classrooms because of this problem. It is important to keep in mind there are limited private provider pre-schools in Southwest Virginia for parents to educate their children.

Our small urban areas near state borders will also have administrative problems if they lose all flexibility. Many families are very transient. A school system like Bristol may enroll many families who, by the time school starts, have moved out of the district. With reduced flexibility it will be more difficult to find an at-risk child to fill that slot.

VPI was established, in large part, to be a supplement to local Head Start programs that are serving low income children. In many of our communities, Head Start and the public schools have found ways to cooperate in recruitment and transition for our low income children. Yet, inadvertently, these new criteria are setting the stage for competition for children that will harm the programs.

We ask that Virginia adopt eligibility policies that give low income children top priority yet provide the flexibility that will help our communities maintain their excellent pre-school programs. Our neighboring states of Tennessee and North Carolina have taken different approaches; yet both stress priority for low income children while giving some flexibility to localities to serve other at-risk children and to coordinate with other programs. Tennessee has a tiered system. All children in the top tier must be admitted before children with other risks are given a spot. North Carolina achieves this flexibility by requiring that 80% of slots go to low income children while allowing 20% to be above-income children with significant risk factors.

Thank you for considering the advantages to providing a level of flexibility within the new criteria for VPI. By providing flexibility for school division to identify the most at-risk children, VPI programs will be better able to address the unique needs of our communities and can ensure that children arrive at Kindergarten ready to learn and ready to succeed.