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**Testimony of  
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Before the  
General Assembly Virginia Preschool Initiative Joint Subcommittee**

10/7/2015 – Mr. Chairman, Members of the Joint Committee: Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you about additional venues to expand pre-k programs for at-risk four year olds in Virginia.

My name is Chris Braunlich, vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, an independent public policy think tank focusing on Virginia state issues. By way of background, I am also a former member of the Fairfax County School Board and immediate past president of the Virginia State Board of Education.

The question we seek to answer is: “How do we reduce the number of unserved students in Virginia, lower barriers to pre-k services, and provide additional data that might be useful in measuring Early Childhood outcomes to inform future programs?”

As you know, the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) currently has more than 7,800 unfilled slots that could be used to serve eligible at-risk four-year-olds. More than 6,200 of these unfilled slots are in just 13 school divisions, and another 400 unfilled slots are in 11 school divisions that do not participate in the program at all.

The Virginia Department of Education has identified three primary reasons for this: An inability to meet the required local match, insufficient space and, in some cases, too few eligible students perhaps spread too thinly to make a program cost effective.

In just these 24 school divisions, more than 6,600 at-risk students are unable to access quality preschool programs. And evidence is growing that these programs have a demonstrably positive effect on the future of these children. Studies of VPI have consistently shown that children attending VPI are more likely to meet early literacy benchmarks, score higher on the third grade Standard of Learning tests, and more likely to be promoted on-time to eighth grade.

A deficiency in all of these studies, however, is that – while they can compare those children who attended VPI with those students that did not – among those with an unknown preschool experience they do not differentiate between those with no preschool experience, those

who may have attended non-public preschool, and those who may have simply had a home-provider childcare experience.

In essence, those who did not attend VPI are lumped together, making it impossible to identify specific elements of the preschool experience so we may learn which are more valuable and which might be duplicated further.

Finally, few non-public providers are involved in the delivery of VPI because of a number of barriers identified by the Virginia Child Care Association, and this further limits expansion. Among those barriers are decisions by Local Education Agencies to simply not include center-based providers; a high, expensive and arguably unnecessary requirement for licensed teachers; limited and confusing communications; and a complex funding mechanism.

We suggest that many of these challenges would be ameliorated by expanding the Virginia Education Improvement Scholarship Tax Credit to permit awarding scholarships to pre-k four year olds.

As you know, the Scholarship Tax Credit is an existing program by which a donor to a qualified scholarship foundation receives a 65 percent state tax credit. That scholarship foundation must, within a year after receiving the donation, provide a scholarship to a low or middle-income student to attend the school of his or her choice. The scholarship is a maximum of 90 percent of the state funding in their school division of residence and the student cannot currently be attending non-public school unless they are already receiving a tax-credited scholarship.

As a result of this program, we estimate that nearly 2,000 students will this year receive an opportunity for an educational placement that better fits their needs.

But this scholarship program does not currently include students in pre-k.

Given the inability of local school divisions to either meet the required local match in the VPI program, or have space available for expansion, we believe the Education Improvement Scholarship Tax Credit is an ideal vehicle for providing additional pre-k opportunities for at-risk four-year-olds.

Scholarship foundations, having received tax-credited donations, should be able to provide scholarships equal to 90 percent of the state share of VPI funding so that at-risk children may attend a qualified non-public pre-k program of the parents' choice. While the state level of VPI funding alone may not be enough to pay full tuition, it is usually the case that non-public schools have supplemental programs to assist low-income families.

There are several arguments in favor of this expansion –

First, it would provide additional opportunities for at-risk children. Because scholarships would be provided to individual children, parents would make the decision about which qualified preschool they would send their child to. The inability of local jurisdictions to provide a match or to have space available would no longer be a barrier. Parents would simply choose the qualified local provider that best fits their child's needs.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of additional at-risk children would have opportunities they simply do not have right now and, with it, a chance for a brighter future.

Secondly, it would provide additional data on which to base future judgments. A challenge of current studies is the inability to differentiate between students who attend different programs or no program at all. We know what works in a public pre-k setting; we do not necessarily have the data for what works in a non-public pre-k setting. Following students who attend non-public pre-k settings through their public school career would add considerably to our knowledge about what works. Incorporating data about these different non-public programs would inform us further about what is effective and what might be more efficient. A program like this would be an important contribution to the development of effective public policy.

Finally, it would reduce barriers to participation by non-public providers, a key element of expanding the number of students served. Let me be clear: Not all non-public providers would be, or should be, eligible to receive a student under the tax credit program.

This scholarship should not be available for childcare. It should only be available to schools that meet certain minimum qualifications that research demonstrates are an important component of effective early childhood learning, including –

- A curriculum aligned with Virginia's *Foundation Blocks for Early Learning*. The curriculum should reflect the vision of the individual institution, but its content should be age appropriate and comprehensively include Language, Literacy, Mathematics, Cognitive abilities related to academic achievement and child development, social and emotional development, creative arts, and physical development and health.
- A maximum class size of 20 students, with a teacher-child ratio of no more than 2:20 (one lead teacher, one aide, and 20 children in the classroom). Established literature and research indicates this is the ceiling for effectiveness.
- A human resource and teacher development program that ensures early learning teachers are proficient in establishing social-emotional warmth, creating high-quality teacher-child interactions, and delivering high-quality instruction based on the standards and curricula.
- A minimum half-day program for the entire school year.

In particular, several barriers identified by the Virginia Child Care Association would fall.

Because parents would make the decisions about where to send their child, funding would no longer be complicated for centers to administer. Parents would be free to drop off and pick up their child. And teachers would not be required to obtain a teaching license or even a B.A. degree.

This last point deserves further elaboration. In his September 2013 paper *Early Learning: The New Fact Base and Cost Sustainability*, the University of Virginia's Dr. Robert Pianta argues quite clearly that "The quality of teacher-child interactions is the mechanism responsible for learning in early care and education settings", and that "The key ingredient of any classroom or school environment, with regard to learning and development is the nature and quality of interaction between adults and children."

That is why a qualification for school participation in the program should include hiring practices and professional development that ensures high level interactions.

But the research on the importance of teacher degree attainment and certification, as Pianta points out, "is murkier." For every study indicating a B.A. is required for high quality teaching, there is another study indicating that teachers with lesser credentials can obtain the same result.

In a state-wide systemized operation, a B.A. degree and a teaching license have become a proxy for determining qualification. But in a smaller and more personalized educational environment, a principal is more likely to make "qualification" determinations based on real quality: Can the teacher interact positively with children? Do they effectively impart to and develop knowledge with pre-k students? Do they command the attention of the classroom? Can they recognize and address problems? Do they share the school's vision and inspiration?

In short, the question should be: "Does the teacher demonstrate quality in the classroom?"

All of these points combine and interact together. Expanding the Education Improvement Scholarship Tax Credit would expand the number of at-risk students receiving services. It would permit us to better measure the effect of public pre-k vs. non-public pre-k vs. no pre-k. And by ensuring schools were free to deploy a variety of pedagogies and inputs beyond baseline qualifications allows us to better determine what works and what doesn't.

And learning what works, and how best to use it, is the goal of everyone in this room.

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