

# Advancing Local Early Childhood Systems in Virginia: Next Steps for Local, Regional, and State Stakeholders

## Executive Summary

### **Strong local early childhood systems are key to ensuring the healthy development of young children.**

Over the last decade, Virginia communities have leveraged public and private sector efforts to make substantial progress in coordinating and strengthening local early childhood systems. The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) partnered with researchers from SRI Education (SRI) to examine the progress and challenges of early childhood systems building in Virginia with a focus on communities that are part of VECF's Smart Beginnings network. This document summarizes the findings from that examination and provides recommendations for how VECF, state government, and local leaders can more equitably and effectively serve children and families.

## Supporting Children and Families During Extraordinary Times

This project is concluding during a period of great uncertainty. As early education and other child-focused service providers seek to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, families have lost access to crucial services. Many families have lost income and many of those who were struggling before the crisis have sunk deeper into poverty. At the same time, recent events have provided a stark reminder that the legacy of racial injustice – embedded in our systems – continues to bestow privilege on some while severely limiting opportunities for others.

These challenges will not be solved simply or quickly. Although we must have the patience to develop long-term remedies, we must also recognize the urgency of supporting the current generation of Virginia's youngest residents during the most sensitive period in their development. **It is incumbent upon VECF to advocate assertively to disrupt inequitable systems and rebuild equitable and durable systems for the good of the communities.**

The information included in this report indicates that, although each Virginia community has unique needs, some common approaches can strengthen early childhood systems statewide. These include maintaining a resolute focus on the central role of systems in improving outcomes for children by ending the perpetuation of disparities, gaining the sustained commitment of influential advocates across sectors, and addressing all aspects of the early childhood system.

**For more information see** Mercier, B., Nakamura, J., Grindal, T., Chow, K. & Golan, S. (2020). *Advancing local early childhood systems in Virginia: Next steps for local, regional, and state stakeholders*. Arlington, VA: SRI International.

## Recommendations

To maximize the systemic impact that could result from equitable access to positive early childhood experiences for children and families, we recommend that Virginia leaders

- 1: Promote a systems-focused orientation for early childhood in Virginia**
- 2: Broaden the scope, participation, and integration of early childhood systems-building partnerships**
- 3: Address the full range of components that enable equitable and durable local early childhood systems**

This report begins with a detailed discussion of SRI's key recommendations. It then describes the process we used for developing recommendations and strategies, including an examination of current systems-building activities. The conclusion summarizes the key lessons learned regarding successes and the challenges faced by the Smart Beginnings community stakeholders to build and sustain their local systems.



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