

IMPLEMENTING 15 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR HIGH-QUALITY PRE-K: Virginia

The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) began in 1995, serving at-risk 4-year-olds who were not enrolled in existing preschool programs. In 2016-2017, 89% of eligible school divisions operated VPI classrooms, and the majority of children participated in public school settings. Funding allocations to local school divisions are based on the number of students eligible for free lunch, but criteria for student eligibility are based on risk factors including, but not limited to: poverty, family unemployment, limited English proficiency, homelessness, parent with limited education, and parent incarceration.

Essential Elements

Fifteen Essential Elements clustered in three categories—Enabling Environment, Support for Educators and Young Learners, and High-Quality Instruction—have been identified among exemplary pre-K programs (Minervino, 2014). Note that practice in the field may vary so as to be either better or worse than might be expected based on specific policy or guidance. Consistency or quality of practice across large-scale programs is more difficult to assess than policy.

Enabling Environment		Rigorous, Articulated Early Learning Policies								Strong Program Practices				
Political Will	Strong Leaders	BA + comp	Class size	Two Adults	Hours/ Dosage	EL Standards	Effective Curriculum	Special Ed	DLL support	HQ Teaching	PD	Child Assessments	Data Driven	Integrated System
●	○	●	●	●	●	●	—	—	—	ND	—	—	—	—

Key: ● Fully Met ○ Partially Met — Not Met ND Not determined

Political will. Gov. Ralph Northam (D) in his first term, replaced Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D) who has been a proponent of preschool and early education. In 2015-2016, new eligibility criteria were mandated by the General Assembly to include children living in households with incomes up to 200% of the federal poverty level. Previously, there was no state mandated income requirement for program eligibility. In the 2016-2017 school year, new income requirements allowed 15% of slots to filled using locally determined eligibility criteria. Lottery revenues continued to account for all state funding for VPI. The VPI program served 18,023 four-year-old children in 2016-2017, a slight decrease from the previous year.

Virginia’s federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) program, VPI+, expands services to 4-year-olds in high needs communities. The state serves an additional 1,406 students in 11 school divisions within this program. PDG funding was also used to enhance the quality of 1,891 VPI slots in 2016-2017.

State businesses and advocates are also actively involved in improving early childhood services, most notably with the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) which has been working on system building efforts, articulating the direct link between quality early education experiences and a productive

future workforce. The Virginia Association for Early Childhood Education (VAECE) works with the Commonwealth Council on Childhood Success to improve professional development of those working with young children and to advocate for children's issues in public policy. The VAECE also works with Elevate Early Education, an organization created by Virginia business, civil, and philanthropic leaders to challenge policymakers to include early childhood in their agendas. Voices for Virginia's Children focuses on advocating for children's policies.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. Lottery funds are disbursed by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to schools and community-based organizations to run VPI. The Office of Humanities and Early Childhood within the Division of Instruction of VDOE provides leadership, coordination, technical assistance support to VPI as well as English, history, social science, fine arts, foreign language elementary and secondary programs. The office is staffed with 17 employees; however, only two of those directly support preschool efforts.

The University of Virginia has supported VDOE in the past, but has not conducted an evaluation of the preschool program since 2011.

Education and compensation. In Virginia, all teachers have at least a CDA and 97% of teachers have a BA or higher. The BA requirement is only required in public school settings, however, 96% of children attended a VPI program housed in a public school in 2016-2017. Preschool teachers in public schools are required to be paid on the same salary schedule as K-3 teachers as mandated by state policy.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. Virginia has a maximum class size of 18 for 4-year-olds and requires a staff-child ratio of 1:9.

Learning time. VPI operates five days per week and localities may choose to offer part-day programs for three hours per day or school-day programs for 5.5 hours per day, though nearly all programs (97% in 2016-2017) operate on a full school-day schedule.

Age-appropriate learning standards. Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning: Comprehensive Standards for Four-Year-Olds were first developed in 2004, revised in 2013, and currently under revision to include college and career ready standards for preschoolers. The 2013 version are comprehensive and aligned with the state's K-3 standards and the required assessment, Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for Preschool (PALS-PreK). The state provides PD on using the ELDS.

System that ensures effective curriculum. Curriculum choice is a local decision, but curricula should align with Virginia's ELDS. The Virginia Preschool Curriculum Review Rubric and Planning Tool was designed to assist localities in identifying and choosing curricula that are based on scientific research and align with the ELDS. While the state offers training to support curriculum implementation, there is not a system to ensure that curricula are implemented with fidelity.

Support for students with special needs. Some children included in the VPI program receive special education services, but data on the number of children are not available. The state does not have specific policies to support children with special needs in inclusion classrooms in VPI.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). State policy in Virginia does not address preschool services for English language learners. Virginia has made some efforts to address the K-12 ELL population. The VDOE's Early Childhood website provides links to resources to support teachers of young English language learners. Virginia is updating their early learning standards to include information related to supporting DLLs.

High-quality teaching. ECERS or CLASS scores were not available for review.

Professional development. All lead teachers must meet the state requirement of 15 clock hours of in-service professional development per year. The monitoring policies in Virginia allow results of child-level assessments to help identify needs that will guide teacher training or professional development. Over 20 state agencies and organizations collaborate through the Virginia Cross-Sector Professional Development Team to create a unified PD system to promote planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of early childhood PD. There is not a requirement or coordination of coaching for VPI teachers.

Child Assessments. Only PALS-PreK is required to be used to assess VPI children, twice a year. Other domains are assessed through locally determined curriculum assessments. Data from the assessments are intended to be used to guide teacher training or professional development, make adjustments to curricula, track child- and program-level outcomes over time, and provide a measure of kindergarten readiness. However, this is an extraordinarily narrow measure of learning and development that leaves out almost all of what is covered by the state's standards. A website that includes technical information and resources has been created to support the use of the PALS in Virginia.

Data-driven decision-making. State site visits were eliminated due to budget constraints in 2011-2012. Desk monitoring of local plans and results of child assessments continue as methods to conduct an annual review of program-level outcomes by the state. The state does not require the use of structured observations of classroom quality.

VPI was last evaluated in 2011 by the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. The study, the first peer reviewed analysis of the effectiveness of the program, showed improved performances in kindergarten and first grade comparing students who did not attend any form of preschool. The last state-mandated evaluation in 2007 from the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission found that VPI students gained in literacy skills during the pre-K year and outperformed other kindergarteners.

Integrated System. The Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning: Comprehensive Standards for Four-Year-Olds provides a foundation to the early learning system. However, the required child assessment, PALS-PreK is not aligned with all domains; curriculum is required to be aligned, but there is not much support or review by the state to ensure this occurs; and professional development opportunities are not able to reinforce an integrated system.