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The General Assembly's Budget: A Win for Kids

In tough fiscal times, the General Assembly funds key children's initiatives

Voices for Virginia's Children is hailing the General Assembly's budget as "a major step forward in enhancing the well-being of the Commonwealth's children". According to Mary Dunne Stewart, policy director at Voices for Virginia's Children, "Even in challenging fiscal times, the General Assembly made the tough decisions and invested in foster care, preschool, and childcare assistance for working families."

One highlight is the expansion and improvement of the **Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI)**, which serves low-income 4-year-olds. The General Assembly's budget increases funding by \$22 million and removes barriers that have kept some localities from participating in the preschool program.

"The General Assembly pushed politics aside and stood up for at-risk four-year olds", said Kathy May, Director of Voices Northern Virginia office. "While not perfect, the compromise preschool expansion focuses on at-risk kids, who research shows will benefit the most, and it removes some of the barriers that have made it difficult for some localities to fully participate. This is a targeted, sensible expansion that will pay huge dividends by enhancing school readiness and educational success of at-risk kids."

In **foster care**, the General Assembly endorsed much of Governor Kaine's child welfare reform package. Specifically, the conference budget report funds a 23% increase in payments to adoptive and foster families, improves recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive families, and includes financial incentives for localities to serve children in the community rather than in institutional settings.

"The General Assembly followed the Governor's lead and clearly understands that children deserve to be in families," said Stewart. "The General Assembly has endorsed reform proposals that will change the face of foster care in Virginia. Instead of a system that relies on facilities, we will have a system that relies on families."

Finally, the General Assembly supported Governor Kaine's proposed \$17 million investment in childcare subsidies and supports, which will help thousands of

children in Virginia. "Subsidies assist low-income working parents struggling to afford childcare. Having a child care subsidy can make the difference between welfare and work for low income parents," said May.

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Voices for Virginia's Children is a statewide, privately funded, non-partisan policy and advocacy organization that builds support for public policies to improve the lives of children. A recognized leader in child advocacy, Voices mobilizes support for initiatives by conducting research, recommending policies, building coalitions, and helping people articulate their support for children.

For more information visit www.vakids.org.