

May 19, 2011

Good morning, Secretary Wright, Madame President and Members of the Board. I am Ann Rasmussen, a policy analyst with Voices for Virginia's Children. Thank you for this opportunity to speak.

Voices for Virginia's Children is a statewide advocacy and research organization that strives to improve the lives of all children through effective public policy. Early care and education is an area in which we put a significant amount of time and resources – particularly on issues related to closing achievement gaps in children that start as early as infancy, including expanding high quality child care and ensuring that all at-risk four year olds have access to preschool .

We wholeheartedly support the Board's commitment to ensure that all children are prepared for school by the time they reach kindergarten, as indicated by Goal 3 of the 2011-2016 Comprehensive Plan. In particular, we are encouraged by your recognition that "closing achievement gaps requires close alignment with the entire spectrum of community and social services, as well as with programs for Virginia's youngest children (age 0-5)."

We know that achievement gaps have their start well before school age. This "school readiness gap" begins at birth due to differences in children's resources and opportunities for optimal development. A 2009 study found meaningful differences in the cognitive and social-emotional development of children as young as 9 months old by income level and race/ethnicity. The study also showed a significant growth in developmental gaps between 9-24 months of ageⁱ. By the time children from low-income families enter kindergarten, they are typically 12-14 months below national norms in language and pre-reading skillsⁱⁱ.

Wherever the Board can create partnerships within Virginia's early childhood programs – whether it is with Early Head Start and Head Start, the Smart Beginnings network, the Virginia Star Quality Initiative, the Home Visiting Consortium, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, or even with Voices for Virginia's Children – you will be making steps to bridge persistent achievement gaps.

Additionally, we know that there are approximately 10,000 at-risk four year olds who are not being served by either Head Start or the Virginia Preschool Initiative, and that the primary reason is local non-participation, either because of lack of funds or lack of space. We need new approaches to help school divisions fully utilize their allocations, especially by encouraging use of high-quality community providers. Voices for Virginia's Children has policy ideas that have been successful elsewhere, and we are here to help.

Again, we are heartened by your efforts to reduce achievement gaps and ensure that all children enter school ready to learn. Thank you for your commitment to early education.

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ⁱ Halle, T., Forry, N., Hair, E., Perper, K., Wandner, L., Wessel, J., & Vick, J. Disparities in early learning and development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). June 2009.

ⁱⁱ Kids Count. Annie E. Casey Foundation. Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters. May 2010.