

S Y M P O S I U M S U M M A R Y

EARLY LEARNING:

a key to

SCHOOL READINESS

Launching a Child Care – Public School Dialogue
About School Readiness in Fairfax County



*The Fund for Early Learning
and School Readiness*

This Symposium was made possible by a grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Early Learning – A Key to School Readiness* symposium brought together child care and Fairfax County public school educators to launch a dialogue about school readiness. The event, held on April 9, 2005, was co-sponsored by Fairfax Futures: The Fund for Early Learning and School Readiness and Fairfax County's Office for Children, and was made possible by a generous grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation.

Keynote speaker highlights:

Jane Woods, Virginia Secretary of Health and Human Resources highlighted the importance of investing in early childhood education. She noted that:

- **Eighty five percent of a person's intellect, personality and social skills are developed by age five, while 95% of public investment in education occurs after children reach age five.**
- **A good preschool education offers a 12% annual return after inflation.**
- **Investment in early childhood education results in a better-educated workforce, a lower crime rate and a flow of skilled workers to meet the county's growing need.**
- **Fairfax County led one of three coalitions recently awarded a \$500,000 Early Childhood Partnership grant by the Commonwealth of Virginia designed to create a replicable model for early childhood education programs.**

Dr. Jerlean Daniel, Deputy Executive Director, National Association for the Education of Young Children, drew from her extensive experience working with young children and shared that:

- **Children bring the hopes and dreams of their families to school with them. At best, school can only help children shine – the basic framework is formed at home.**
- **Children need to come to school with curiosity encouraged early on by adults who consider it acceptable to ask questions and provide opportunities for children to do so.**
- **Schools are "ready" if their leadership is enthusiastic and supportive of teachers and if teachers believe all children can learn and they, in turn, can learn from children.**

Next Steps

- **Continue the dialogue between child care educators and public school teachers.**
- **Engage parents as partners in their children's school readiness.**
- **Nurture readiness partnerships that bring together early childhood educators with public schools, county and business resources and others in the community.**
- **Encourage greater business interest and investment through Fairfax Futures: The Fund for Early Learning and School Readiness.**



OVERVIEW

On Saturday, April 9, 2005, Fairfax County child care educators joined principals, kindergarten and first grade teachers from Fairfax County Public Schools to launch a critical dialogue about school readiness for the county's youngest residents. The day-long symposium, *Early Learning: A Key to School Readiness*, was co-sponsored by *Fairfax Futures: The Fund for Early Learning and School Readiness* and the Fairfax County Department of Family Services / Office for Children.

Fairfax Futures is a nonprofit, charitable organization created in 2004 to encourage community investment in quality early learning experiences and school readiness for all children in Fairfax County. It works in partnership with the county's Office for Children, Fairfax County Public Schools, the childcare community and businesses to create or support initiatives that enhance children's early learning and school readiness.

The *Early Learning* symposium was developed as a means of bringing together two communities integral to the early education of young children in Fairfax County – child care professionals and Fairfax County Public School educators and administrators. While both communities contribute significantly to the education of young children, a common framework for discussing school readiness has been lacking. This led *Fairfax Futures* and the county's Office for Children to sponsor the *Early Learning* symposium, made possible through a generous grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation – a leader in supporting initiatives benefiting children and families in Fairfax County.



SYMPOSIUM HIGHLIGHTS

Nearly two hundred people convened inside the Fairview Park Marriott in Falls Church, Virginia, to exchange ideas and best practices and to explore school – child care community initiatives that could improve children’s school readiness in Fairfax County.

Speakers Emphasize Educational, Social and Economic Benefits of Readiness

Gerry Connolly, Chairman of Fairfax County’s Board of Supervisors, welcomed symposium participants. He invited those in the audience to think of school readiness as a puzzle with many pieces. Those pieces include a top-notch school system, a caring child care community, involved families and committed members of the business community who recognize their responsibility to invest in the county’s skilled work force of the future.

Chairman Connolly spoke of Fairfax County’s active role in the support of early childhood education by helping thousands of parents locate and pay for child care. The county’s Office for Children also provides training for early childhood educators and has a major impact on those who work with and care for young children.

Almost 70% of Fairfax County families today are ones in which both parents work outside the home.

Dean Klein, Manager of Community Relations at the Freddie Mac Foundation, noted that in Fairfax County, too many children enter kindergarten not fully prepared for success in school. Almost 70% of Fairfax County families today are ones in which both parents work outside the home; as a result, the responsibility for preparing children for school is now more often shared by families and the early childhood workforce, with additional support from businesses and philanthropies working in partnership with county resources. Freddie Mac Foundation has invested \$249 million since 1991 in programs supporting children and communities, including two grants to support the outreach efforts of Fairfax Futures.



Hunter Mill District Supervisor **Catherine Hudgins** shared her perspective as Chair of the Board of Supervisors' Human Services Committee; she asked participants to consider whether youth who have engaged in risky behavior throughout their lives and end up in the court system, might have had a different outcome had their early childhood education been better coordinated.

Eighty five percent of a person's intellect, personality and social skills are developed by age five, while 95% of public investment in education occurs after children reach age five.

Symposium participants heard from **Jane Woods**, Secretary of Health and Human Resources, Commonwealth of Virginia. She noted that public spending on children's education did not reflect research priorities – 85% of a person's intellect, personality and social skills are developed by age five, while 95% of public investment in education occurs after children reach age five.

Secretary Woods noted the complexity of the early childhood education issue. Child care providers are poorly compensated, work long, oftentimes non-traditional hours, have few benefits, and, as a profession, experience high turnover. It is not a profitable business, yet it is an enormous expense for parents.

Investment in early childhood education results in a better-educated workforce, a lower crime rate and a flow of skilled workers to meet the county's growing need.

Those interested in promoting economic development are beginning to appreciate the impact of quality early childhood education on economic growth. The Secretary shared research that indicates that a ***good preschool education offers a 12% annual return after inflation.***

Secretary Woods noted that the Commonwealth of Virginia has made good strides under the leadership of Governor Mark Warner in the area of early childhood education. She announced that ***Fairfax County led one of three coalitions recently awarded a \$500,000 Early Childhood Partnership grant*** that is designed to create a replicable model for early childhood education



programs elsewhere in the state. In addition, more than 40,000 New Parent kits have been distributed to parents with new babies under an early childhood information initiative created by Governor Warner. This May, Governor Warner will hold an *Early Childhood Summit* that will bring together people from all over the state to discuss school readiness issues and will mark the kickoff of a statewide education and resource campaign.

Building Connections to Support a Continuum of Learning

Dr. Jack Dale, Superintendent, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), welcomed the schools' participation in a dialogue about quality early childhood education in Fairfax County. He invited participants to share their thoughts about possible systemic changes to help ensure that children in FCPS achieve their full potential.

Dr. Joan Isenberg, Associate Dean at George Mason University's College of Education, moderated a morning panel of public school educators, child care professionals and other child advocates. They included: **Anita Blain**, Principal, Timberlane Elementary School; **Gail Ritchie**, first grade teacher, Kings Park Elementary School; **Elizabeth Egan**, Executive Director, Main Street Child Development Center; **Renna Jordan**, CHILDFIND and; **Aisha Bhatti**, family child care provider. Panelists' remarks centered on three themes: child and family issues related to school readiness; curricular issues and age-appropriate experiences and; policy and child care professional issues.

Panelists discussed school readiness both in terms of preparing children for success in school and also preparing schools to deal effectively with children at varying levels of readiness. Elizabeth Egan expressed a wish that her staff could pin a note on each child entering kindergarten indicating his or her progress since entering preschool: The child "may not know the ABCs but at least will pick up a book; may not sit still but, at one time, could not sit at all; may not write his or her name on a lined page, but at one time did not know what to do with a pencil or a box of crayons."

Kindergarten teachers increasingly recognize the need for classroom activities that accommodate children's social and emotional preparedness. Teachers appreciate the need to provide emotional support and opportunities for productive play. However, panelists suggested that requirements to teach specific curricula can pull teachers in the opposite direction.

Dr. Isenberg reinforced the basic tenet that children learn through play. It's important for child care providers to be able to articulate the exact educational functions of various forms of play and plan an environment that promotes learning through experiences.



Child care providers recognize that exposure to language and symbols (e.g., through books, songs, and field trips) help develop children’s verbal skills, all of which contribute to literacy; as a result, children do not need to be pushed to read and write before kindergarten.

Child care providers need continuing education, improved compensation and regular interaction with teachers in the public schools.

Panelists agreed that partnerships are essential to school readiness. The Main Street Child Development Center now opens its doors to area schools so that principals and teachers can see how children are being prepared for kindergarten. CHILDFIND, in turn, relies on area pre-schools, child care centers and family child care providers to refer children with special needs in time to provide appropriate instruction and care. Public and private sector collaborations can stimulate and increase quality early childhood education opportunities for children throughout Fairfax County.

All concurred that child care providers need continuing education, improved compensation, and regular interaction with teachers in the public schools. It was suggested that teachers be given an additional in-service day devoted to training in early childhood development.

Ready or Not, Here Come the Children

Dr. Jerlean Daniel, Deputy Executive Director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, offered an engaging keynote luncheon presentation based on her extensive experience working in various capacities with young children. Her organization has a national network of nearly 450 local, state, and regional affiliates and is part of a growing global alliance. With over 100,000 members, NAEYC is the world's largest entity working on behalf of young children. Dr. Daniel shared her experience with these perspectives:

A flier is not enough. It may not be easy to involve parents in the public schools using traditional methods such as fliers and open houses, but it is worth some effort for teachers and schools to look for imaginative ways to launch conversations.

Guess who’s coming to school? Dr. Daniel emphasized the importance of knowing one’s neighbors. Demographics are changing dramatically in



communities such as Fairfax County, whose image suggesting all families are wealthy no longer comports with reality. Children bring the hopes and dreams of their families to school with them. At best, school can only help children shine—the basic framework is formed at home. It is important for schoolteachers to understand the circumstances in which their pupils grow up. For example, many low-income families move “from pillar to post” in search of better opportunities for their children, an effort that should be lauded.

A child who is ready for school is a socially competent child. Dr. Daniel noted that school readiness does not happen by accident. In the field of early childhood education, it is key that young children develop the self confidence that enables them to function well in diverse settings. A prepared child has good negotiation skills and seeks out assistance in new or challenging situations.

Children need responsive adults, at home or elsewhere, who give them opportunities every day to talk at length and in-depth about whatever is on their minds. They need to interact with adults who do not limit their conversation to simplistic, “baby talk”, but rather, expose children to the richness of the adult vocabulary.

Schools are nested in communities. Teachers who dislike scripted curriculums would find it helpful to get support from the community in their efforts to teach in a way that is more responsive to the immediate needs of children in their classroom.

Ready or not, here come the children. We define school readiness to include schools being ready for children, whoever they are. Schools are ready if their instructional leadership – the superintendent and department chairs – is enthusiastic and supportive of teachers and if the teachers believe all children can learn and they, in turn, can learn from children. “Ready” schools go out of their way to get what they need to help children understand and view parents as partners. They explain to parents what the assessment process is, how it will be interpreted, and who will use the results. Their assessments are fair and appropriate, and they have procedures for meeting the needs of children who have not grown up speaking English.

An Afternoon of Music and Shared Insights

Following lunch, guests were treated to a short musical performance by Kofi Dennis, an artist at Wolf Trap Institute for Early Learning through the Arts. The Institute provides arts-in-education services for children ages 3-5 and their teachers and families through the disciplines of drama, music and movement.



The afternoon symposium session was facilitated by **Ann Monday**, Assistant Superintendent, Instructional Services, Fairfax County Public Schools.

Participants at each table were asked to think about a future that provides what every child needs for success in school and to discuss ways to promote the collaboration needed to achieve this goal.

Table groups addressed three questions:

- ***How should we define school readiness?***
- ***What specific steps can you take to begin building a school readiness partnership this fall?***
- ***What actions could you carry out with key partners within one year, and how might you sustain these actions into the future?***

Symposium participants suggested that school readiness relates not only to literacy, but is also defined by a child's social and emotional readiness, as well as access to proper diet, good medical care and a stable family environment. They stressed the importance of parental involvement and understanding, the need for child care and public school support in engaging families and their children, and improved community outreach and support. They expressed a strong interest in continuing the dialogue between the child care and public school communities through regular early childhood symposia.

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