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

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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.

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.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Promote a systems-focused orientation for early childhood in Virginia

Strategy 1: Champion equitable and durable local early childhood systems

Children are best able to thrive when their families are strong and well-supported.[1] Equitable and effective early childhood systems can help ensure that supports for families are coordinated and aligned to promote children's healthy development. Therefore, equity and justice must be key principles in the development and implementation of Virginia's local early childhood systems.

- VECF's public/private role provides a unique opportunity to articulate the value and essential nature of equitable early childhood systems building. We think it is important that VECF continues to make the case for systems building to all stakeholders, including policymakers, funders, practitioners, and parents. This could be done by documenting improved systems outcomes, such as cost-effectiveness of systems coordination, for equitably serving more families and children and providing higher quality services.

- VECF should help embed systems building in state government efforts by advocating for systems-building objectives and financing to be articulated in various state-level planning documents, policy statements, contracts, and budgets.

Strategy 2: Commit to systemic solutions in policy, practice, and investments in young children and families

Communities need resources that build their capacity to design, implement, and sustain systems building.

- VECF should support demonstrations of how existing initiatives can apply resources for systemic outcomes.

- Community systems-building initiative leaders can deepen their understanding of how to apply system design principles to their local context. VECF can help to build the capacities of local community leaders in this area through targeted training and technical assistance.

- State agencies should undertake a planning process to explore structural reforms and additional resources that could promote more effective state and local systems building. For example, state agencies may need to collaborate on blended funding or cross-agency initiatives that enable more holistic "wrap-around" supports for families and children. The state agencies should also provide resources through grants and financing mechanisms that require recipients to document their system design activities and plans for impacting systems-level outcomes.

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1 Cobb, G., & Ponder, K. (2014). The nuts and bolts of building early childhood systems through state/local initiatives. Boston, MA: BUILD Initiative. Retrieved from http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Nuts%20and%20Bolts%20of%20Building%20Early%20Childhood%20Systems%20through%20State-Local%20Initiatives.pdf

Recommendation 2: Broaden the scope, participation, and integration of early childhood systems-building partnerships

Strategy 1: Deepen engagement with local child- and family-supporting entities beyond those that focus on early childhood care and education

Smart Beginnings and other local initiatives have made tremendous progress building systems that provide young children and their families access to high quality early care and education.

- VECF should support the strategic facilitation of and technical assistance for communities' capacity to engage with a more comprehensive set of child- and family-serving entities.

- Community systems-building initiatives should seek greater coordination with the many other entities that interact with children and families. These include entities that serve children directly (e.g., health care systems, food and nutrition services, child welfare) and those that support parents and guardians (e.g., housing, mental health).

Strategy 2: Strengthen the coordination of Virginia's early childhood systems investments

The use of flexible funding streams and integrated financing mechanisms across relevant state entities could facilitate more comprehensive cross-sector partnerships and coordination. This could provide structures and supports for local systems builders to broaden participation, expand coordination, and integrate financing across diverse stakeholders.

- VECF should conduct analyses and pilot demonstrations of integrated financing mechanisms to support and hold the state accountable for investment strategies and efficiencies.

- State leaders should model impactful, multi-sector systems building by strengthening connections and coordination among state agencies that fund the myriad services and systems that support young children and their families.

Strategy 3: Improve understanding about and responsiveness to the needs, assets, barriers, and preferences of families to inform equitable systems design and implementation

VECF and Smart Beginnings initiatives have successfully engaged business leaders, educators, and state and local officials in guiding systems-building efforts. However, much of the engagement with families has been through one-way dissemination of information. Many local initiatives disseminate information widely to families, but few described actively engaging families to better understand their needs, assets, barriers, and preferences as part of local systems building planning.

- VECF should pilot and scale evidence-based strategies for genuine engagement of families in community systems building.

- Community systems-building initiatives should commit to consistent evidence-based strategies that authentically engage families as partners in planning, designing, and implementing systems solutions that help all families and communities thrive. Through their participation in local systems-building work, parents might also develop leadership skills that will build their capacity to advocate for their families and communities.

Recommendation 3: Address the full range of components that enable equitable and durable local early childhood systems

Strategy 1: Identify and address local systems gaps to inform strategic planning and action

Most Smart Beginnings local systems-building initiatives made substantial progress in using evidence-based practices, collaboration, and communication. System design, finance, and data systems often received less attention.

- VECF should target community-specific funding and technical assistance for addressing gaps in local systems building.

- Community systems-building initiatives should use the VECF strategy map[2] as a guide and regularly examine activities related to each of the six system components and track community-level indicators of system functioning. This information should then be central to the development of strategic plans and to the assessment of progress toward community and equity goals.

Strategy 2: Invest in data systems and other strategies that promote equity and evidence-informed planning and decision making

Key components of an early childhood system as depicted in the VECF Strategy Map

Cross-sector collaboration

Communication and engagement

Data systems

Early childhood system components

Financing

Quality standards/ evidence-based practices

System design

Many leaders of Smart Beginnings local systems-building initiatives recognize the importance of using data for system planning and improvement. However, most did not report collecting, sharing, and analyzing data among their top priorities.
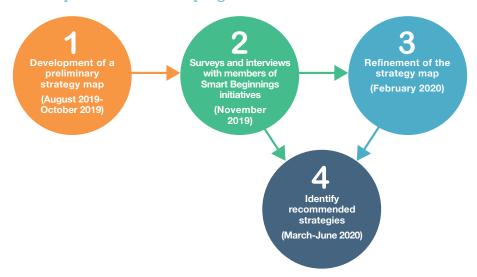
- VECF should help state initiatives to improve access and use of data systems through supporting pilots and demonstrations of new innovations and improvements, such as assigning unique student identifiers to children in prekindergarten rather than in kindergarten.

- State agency leaders should strengthen the culture of data sharing and data use across state entities through stepwise development of an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS). State agencies can support local departments in collecting and using disaggregated data to identify and address inequities and disparate outcomes to be targeted for greater investment. Particularly with the new data collection opportunities offered by the Preschool Development Grant Birth-5 (PDG B-5), the Virginia Department of Education is in a good position to support local communities by sharing information and building their capacity to use data.

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2 A report with information on the development of the VECF strategy map and indicators can be found at https://www.vecf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/vecf-strategy-map-report-050620.pdf

Process for Developing Recommendations and Strategies

This report is the result of a ten-month engagement with VECF staff, members of the VECF board of directors and Advisors Council, Smart Beginnings local partners, state agency leaders, and experts in child and family services. The SRI team worked with these stakeholders to identify priorities and challenges informing the development of strategic guidance. The findings and recommendations are intended to support Virginia's efforts to build and sustain early childhood systems that provide all children, especially the most vulnerable, equitable access to opportunities. The process for our collaboration is described below (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Overview of process for developing recommendations

1. **Development of a preliminary strategy map** (August 2019-October 2019)
2. **Surveys and interviews with members of Smart Beginnings initiatives** (November 2019)
3. **Refinement of the strategy map** (February 2020)
4. **Identify recommended strategies** (March-June 2020)

1. **Development of a preliminary strategy map for building local early childhood systems in Virginia.** A strategy map is a diagram of the relationships among dedicated resources, actions, and desired outcomes. SRI created a preliminary strategy map that was informed by VECF's strategic plan, core principles, and framework for Smart Beginnings and by information on the key components of early childhood systems outside of Virginia. SRI then collaborated with VECF staff and board members and Advisors Council, representatives from Smart Beginnings initiatives, and a range of other stakeholders to refine the preliminary strategy map during two in-person workshops.

2. **Data collection through surveys and interviews with local Smart Beginnings partners to understand how current activities aligned with the preliminary strategy map.**[3] SRI staff administered surveys to

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3 See Appendix A for more information on the survey and interview methods.

each of the 17 Smart Beginnings directors and conducted in depth interviews with 53 Smart Beginnings staff and partners from eight local Smart Beginnings communities. A primary purpose for collecting and analyzing these data was to better understand whether and to what extent Smart Beginnings initiatives focused on the six components of a strong local early childhood system: cross-sector collaboration, communication and engagement, financing, quality standards/evidence-based practices, data systems, and system design. SRI staff used survey and interview data to identify the components on the strategy map that Smart Beginnings activities were addressing and areas where additional support might be needed.[4]

3. **Refinement of the strategy map and development of associated indicators for local early childhood systems building in Virginia.** SRI facilitated a third in-person meeting with VECF staff, representatives from Smart Beginnings initiatives, and VECF board members and Advisors Council to share how survey and interview findings aligned with the initial version of the strategy map, and to discuss possible revisions given study findings. VECF and its stakeholders sought to develop an aspirational strategy map that reflects future goals of local early childhood systems building in Virginia. The SRI team, in consultation with VECF staff and stakeholders, also developed a core set of indicators (specific, measurable characteristics) aligned with the system outcomes, family outcomes, and child outcomes depicted on the strategy map to track progress on these objectives.

- Exhibit 2 presents the revised strategy map that resulted from this process. The VECF strategy map and its associated indicators are designed to provide guidance and support for planning, implementation, and progress of local systems building efforts in Virginia. The strategy map provides stakeholders with a straightforward way to communicate systems-building goals and activities with various audiences, including local system-building initiatives (e.g., Smart Beginnings, Mixed Delivery, and Preschool Development Grant communities), policy makers, and funders.

- The strategy map consists of five sections:

  - **VECF Systems Building Efforts** represent the primary actions VECF takes to support early childhood systems-building efforts at the state and local levels: (1) Support local systems building and capacity, (2) Build partnerships and engagement, (3) Secure outcome-driven investments, (4) Drive improvement and nurture innovation, and (5) Influence state-level policy and decision making. VECF staff do this through conducting policy analyses, advocating with executive branch and legislative leaders, administering grants, providing technical assistance, and facilitating peer learning, collaboration, and relationships.

  - **Local Early Childhood Systems** activities are represented by six hexagons depicting the key components of a sustainable local early childhood system. These are the activities that Smart Beginnings or other local system builders must engage in to build and sustain an effective local early childhood system. The components work together to support a coherent early childhood system (represented by the center hexagon in golden yellow). The colors of the hexagons align with the colors of the areas of VECF supports, described above. Each system component includes specific activities, which are described in detail in the full strategy map report. The "Current local systems-building activities

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4 The results of these efforts are described in greater detail in the "Current Local Systems Building Activities Within the Smart Beginnings Network" section of this report.
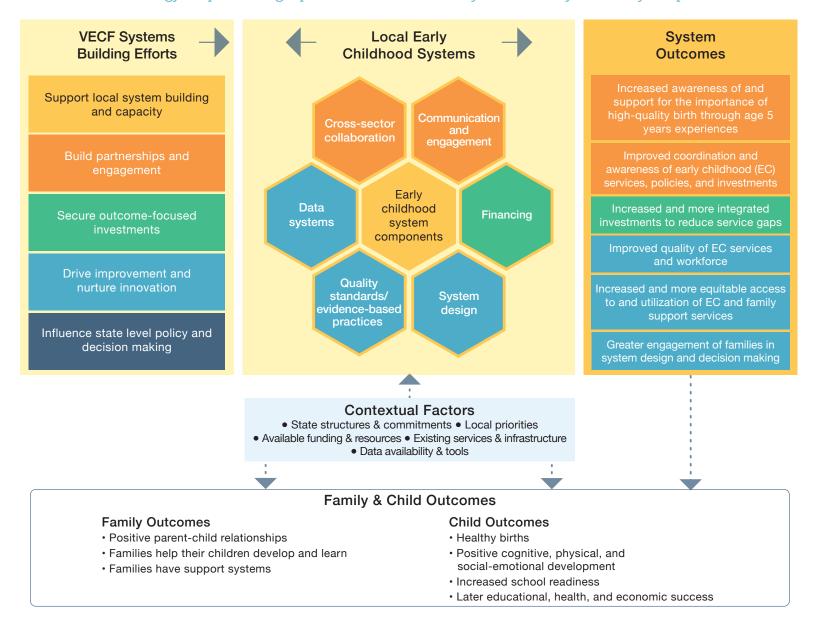
within the Smart Beginnings network" section provides information on the activities of Smart Beginnings initiatives in each of these components.

– **Contextual Factors** (light blue box) shown under the local early childhood systems column represent other factors (e.g., state structures and commitments, available funding and resources) that influence and impact a local early childhood system and child and family outcomes.

– **System Outcomes** (third column) are the intended outcomes of the systems-building work of local Smart Beginnings initiatives.

– **Family & Child Outcomes** are the intended outcomes for Virginia children and families. These outcomes are influenced by VECF and Smart Beginnings activities, but they also depend on larger state, federal, and private investments in the services and supports for young children and their families.[5]

4. **Analysis of actions needed to move from current local systems building activities and supports to achieve goals outlined in the strategy map.** Using the strategy map, SRI researchers, in collaboration with VECF staff and stakeholders, identified notable successes and areas where local Smart Beginnings initiatives could bolster their attention and efforts to develop stronger local early childhood systems. We also identified where VECF supports for local communities could be strengthened and where the state could provide needed infrastructure and supports.

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5 A description of the specific indicators that VECF and stakeholders can use to track progress toward system outcomes and family and child outcomes can be found in Appendix D of the strategy map report at https://www.vecf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/vecf-strategy-map-report-050620.pdf

Exhibit 2. VECF strategy map: Building equitable and durable early childhood systems to yield positive outcomes

VECF Systems Building Efforts

- Support local system building and capacity
- Build partnerships and engagement
- Secure outcome-focused investments
- Drive improvement and nurture innovation
- Influence state level policy and decision making

Local Early Childhood Systems

- Cross-sector collaboration
- Communication and engagement
- Data systems
- Early childhood system components
- Financing
- Quality standards/evidence-based practices
- System design

System Outcomes

- Increased awareness of and support for the importance of high-quality birth through age 5 years experiences
- Improved coordination and awareness of early childhood (EC) services, policies, and investments
- Increased and more integrated investments to reduce service gaps
- Improved quality of EC services and workforce
- Increased and more equitable access to and utilization of EC and family support services
- Greater engagement of families in system design and decision making

Contextual Factors
- State structures & commitments • Local priorities
- Available funding & resources • Existing services & infrastructure
- Data availability & tools

Family & Child Outcomes

Family Outcomes
- Positive parent-child relationships
- Families help their children develop and learn
- Families have support systems

Child Outcomes
- Healthy births
- Positive cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development
- Increased school readiness
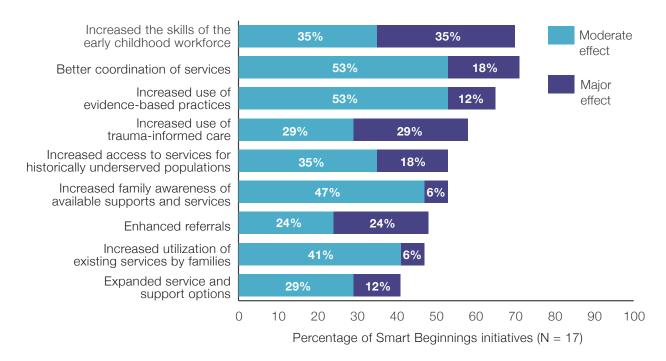- Later educational, health, and economic success

Current Local Systems-Building Activities Within the Smart Beginnings Network

Smart Beginnings initiatives implement a broad range of strategies and activities to raise community awareness about the importance of quality experiences for young children and to promote the use of quality standards and practices in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings. Initiatives also convene influential stakeholders, identifying and leveraging funding to support their goals and developing data-informed strategic plans to communicate about their work.

Smart Beginnings staff and partners reported that their initiative serves a unique purpose in the community, and many reported that the work of their Smart Beginnings initiative has led to an increased focus on systems building. They also reported that their initiative has positively impacted their community's early childhood system by taking important steps to establish its infrastructure. Most Smart Beginnings directors reported that the work of their initiatives has increased the skills of the early childhood workforce, led to improved coordination of services, and increased the use of evidence-based practices (Exhibit 3). These perceived impacts particularly align with the Quality Standards/Evidence-Based Practices and Cross-Sector Collaboration systems-building components of the Smart Beginnings strategy map. Because Smart Beginnings' efforts in these two components typically address child care and early education settings, the impacts of Smart Beginnings are likely greatest in that sector. Although sometimes limited by available resources, Smart Beginnings' efforts overall appear to be strengthening local systems, which in turn are contributing to improved outcomes for children and families, particularly in preparing young children for school. VECF plays an important role in communicating the successes of local Smart Beginnings partners and the value of early childhood systems building to a broad array of stakeholders across the Commonwealth.

All of the Smart Beginnings initiatives reported actively addressing aspects of most of the six local systems components depicted in the strategy map. However, several Smart Beginnings initiatives addressed a limited range of activities and strategies within these components, and some Smart Beginnings leaders reported having limited capacity to engage in the more complex aspects of systems building, such as system design. These data indicate that local systems building initiative leaders need support from VECF to determine the gaps in their local systems and identify opportunities to build their capacity to engage in more comprehensive efforts.

Exhibit 3. Smart Beginnings initiatives reported having their greatest effect on increasing the skills of the early childhood workforce, improving coordination of services and supports, and increasing the use of evidence-based practices

Percentage of Smart Beginnings initiatives (N = 17)

Category	Moderate effect	Major effect
Increased the skills of the early childhood workforce	35%	35%
Better coordination of services	53%	18%
Increased use of evidence-based practices	53%	12%
Increased use of trauma-informed care	29%	29%
Increased access to services for historically underserved populations	35%	18%
Increased family awareness of available supports and services	47%	6%
Enhanced referrals	24%	24%
Increased utilization of existing services by families	41%	6%
Expanded service and support options	29%	12%

Cross-sector collaboration

Smart Beginnings initiatives have convened numerous stakeholders to promote early childhood systems building, but the breadth of representation and depth of collaboration have varied.

Smart Beginnings initiatives have built partnerships across diverse early childhood stakeholders, some of whom are collaborating on shared goals through their association with Smart Beginnings. Building on VECF's reputation and support, several Smart Beginnings partners reported being considered a trusted ally and convener in their community, which has attracted diverse stakeholders to the systems-building work (Appendix B).

Some Smart Beginnings-sponsored convenings have led to collaborative problem solving and leveraging collective resources. Some Smart Beginnings staff and partners reported that their efforts have reduced duplication of services, broken down silos, and decreased fragmentation of services. Community stakeholders from multiple Smart Beginnings initiatives described using Smart Beginnings convenings primarily to share information and resources rather than to collaborate on specific activities.

Most Smart Beginnings initiative leaders identified business leaders as critical partners, but they had varying success engaging them in their early childhood systems-building efforts.

Some Smart Beginnings leaders successfully engaged business executives, typically in an advisory role or as a board member. One initiative had reorganized several years earlier and is now hosted by a local chamber of commerce. The Smart Beginnings director reported that, in addition to reducing their operational costs, the close relationship with the chamber facilitated increased support from the local business community for early childhood systems building. In contrast, a Smart Beginnings director from a rural community reported that the lack of local businesses made identifying and engaging these leaders extremely difficult.

Communication and engagement

Smart Beginnings initiatives widely shared messages about the importance of children's early years, but two-way communication with some stakeholder groups could be improved.

All Smart Beginnings initiatives reported disseminating information to raise awareness of early childhood and local resources. A few Smart Beginnings initiatives reported having limited capacity for marketing, but many others broadly disseminated information in their communities. Some of these efforts aimed to increase awareness of the importance of early childhood for the long-term well-being of children and for building and sustaining vibrant local economies (Appendix B). These Smart Beginnings partners sought to communicate that preparing young children for school is a community investment in a well-prepared future work force. Other communities used online and local media to publicize local information and resources such as kindergarten registration dates and community events.

The reported impacts of these communications varied. Members of two Smart Beginnings initiatives reported a successful increase in local awareness of the importance of high quality early childhood experiences; a partner from another Smart Beginnings initiative reported ongoing challenges with making the case for investing in children's experiences from birth through age five to influential community stakeholders.

Some Smart Beginnings initiative leaders reported challenges with engaging government leaders and families in discussions about early childhood systems building.

A small number of Smart Beginnings initiatives attempted to engage influential government leaders in planning for early childhood systems building by inviting state legislators to meetings or advocating for an early childhood office that could promote systems building within the local government. Other Smart Beginnings partners acknowledged that they had limited capacity to engage community leaders who are not already

participating in Smart Beginnings activities. In addition, few Smart Beginnings staff or partners reported engaging families or child care providers in systems-building activities. In one community, Smart Beginnings leaders described a shift from attempting to educate parents about the importance of early childhood to attempting to engage them as partners in collaborative efforts. Another interview participant noted that it can be difficult to engage families in systems building, which may seem far removed from parenting. A school division leader reported that simple messages showing that early childhood stakeholders are working together to support children are more meaningful to families than detailed explanations of the technical aspects of quality early learning environments.

Financing

Long-term, multi-stream funding allows initiatives to engage in deeper system development, and initiatives would benefit from support for more sophisticated financing strategies.

The ability to secure sustainable funding influenced the extent to which Smart Beginnings initiatives could focus deeply on building and sustaining their early childhood systems. In addition to funding from VECF, some Smart Beginnings initiatives secured reliable, long-term support from their parent organization (e.g., a government agency, the United Way) or another philanthropic source (Appendix B). Directors from other initiatives reported difficulty obtaining funding that would allow them to pursue deeper systems-building activities. Instead, funding often went to administrative costs and to supplement local services. One Smart Beginnings director reported spending significant time pursuing multiple small grants earmarked for specific early childhood programs and localities rather than engaging in deeper system development. Smart Beginnings staff and partners across initiatives indicated that they could use more support to identify flexible funding sources to accomplish their early childhood systems-building goals.

Smart Beginnings initiatives valued individualized support from VECF to pursue long-term funding partners.

VECF helped multiple Smart Beginnings initiatives identify potential sources of financial support by assisting with the technical aspects of funding applications and supporting data-based arguments that could make a case to potential funders. With support from VECF, one Smart Beginnings initiative conducted a fiscal mapping of one of the poorest neighborhoods in the community and found that private funding accounted for only seven percent of investments supporting that area. The Smart Beginnings initiative communicated this to influential stakeholders, which led to increased philanthropic support for the neighborhood. A few Smart Beginnings initiatives leaders who secured grant funding with VECF support found that those initial successes opened the door to later funding opportunities (Appendix B).

A few Smart Beginnings initiatives identified innovative ways to use funds more efficiently and effectively. Smart Beginnings initiatives participating in mixed delivery pilots promoted efficiencies in local ECCE programs by working with providers to expand their classrooms for four-year-olds to serve more families. In addition, two Smart Beginnings initiatives strategically implemented and oversaw local efforts (i.e., shared services agreements among providers and awareness campaigns) until they were well established and then transferred fiscal and operational responsibility to a local entity. Smart Beginnings directors and staff did not discuss other examples of inter-organizational fiscal collaboration such as braiding and blending funds. Without guidance on how coordinated financing across organizations can work, it may be difficult for local early childhood systems to implement these approaches. State agencies can incorporate the use of flexible funding streams across different entities to serve as a model for local early childhood system building initiatives looking to expand their capabilities in this area.

Quality standards/ evidence-based practices

Trainings and technical assistance around quality were mainly for ECCE providers and leveraged existing improvement networks.

Smart Beginnings initiatives, particularly in less populated, non-urban regions, supported quality improvement through trainings and technical assistance for child-care providers. Some initiatives offered Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)™ trainings to promote the use of high quality practices and standards and to make sure that providers across their community had needed credentials (Appendix B). Some initiatives also supported private and home-based providers with coaching and literacy supports. Smart Beginnings partners pointed to increases in the number of CLASS™ trainings offered in their regions and to improved Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) scores for kindergarten students as evidence of the Smart Beginnings initiative's impact on quality programming.

Smart Beginnings initiatives considered local contexts in their approaches to quality improvement and leveraged support from existing networks and partnerships. Smart Beginnings initiatives met the needs of local providers by offering a range of training modalities and locations. They also aligned their efforts with existing quality improvement networks, such as credentialing programs and Virginia's Quality Rating and Improvement System, called *Virginia Quality* (Appendix B). Some initiatives collaborated with community colleges to support child care providers in obtaining certifications or degrees that would expand their skills and increase the quality of their care. One Smart Beginnings initiative had a close partnership with a local employee of *Virginia Quality*, and this collaboration facilitated data sharing to identify training needs of local providers. Through relationships with local partners, another Smart Beginnings initiative supported private providers in getting licensed and eventually enrolling in *Virginia Quality*.

Data systems

A few Smart Beginnings initiatives shared data with stakeholders, but many needed better data tools and access to track progress and inform decisions.

Smart Beginnings initiatives reported using resources from VECF and others to improve their data use. With funding and technical assistance from VECF, one Smart Beginnings initiative was creating a data system to track provider professional development and credentials and integrate *Virginia Quality* data with PALS and other local data. Participants in another Smart Beginnings initiative credited VECF with enabling them to get access to data to analyze community needs they could not have otherwise identified. Several other Smart Beginnings initiatives sought to improve and expand their data capacity by hiring data experts and investing in technology to support data use in their early childhood systems.

Smart Beginnings leaders acknowledged the importance of using data to drive activities, but they varied in the extent to which they reported identifying, tracking, and disseminating relevant data. Smart Beginnings initiatives most often used data for dissemination (e.g., to secure additional funding or get stakeholder buy-in for initiatives), rather than for program improvement or tracking community-wide benchmarks (Appendix B). Some Smart Beginnings initiatives with mixed delivery pilots shared data through data-sharing agreements. Access to community-level data and the capacity of Smart Beginnings staff and partners to interpret and meaningfully use data impacted their ability to engage in certain system building activities. State agencies play an important role in investing in data systems that provide local initiatives with the information they need to track their progress toward outcomes. Given new data collection offered by PDG B-5, this is an opportune time for state agencies to support local data capacity initiatives. Once communities have access to meaningful data, VECF can help build the capacity of local leaders to gather and interpret data and engage in data-based decision making to drive collaborative goals and activities.

Success Story: In one Smart Beginnings community, a data team composed of individuals from Smart Beginnings and other local agencies, such as the health department, school systems, and local clinics, meets frequently to conduct data dives. Currently, the initiative has identified 50 school readiness indicators and has hired an outside consultant to provide support for using data dashboard software to track trends within the region. The initiative used data to track how a collaborative effort they supported resulted in improved PALS scores for children in the area, which the director reported helped them secure additional funding from a foundation to support system building.

System design

Smart Beginnings staff and partners worked on strategic planning efforts, but few reported engaging in other important system design activities such as coordinating services and tracking target outcomes.

Most initiatives had a documented, multi-year strategic plan or school readiness plan. Having a plan with common goals across programs, agencies, and organizations is essential to building a coordinated early childhood system. Most Smart Beginnings initiatives reported working with a variety of stakeholders to create a strategic or school readiness plan with objectives to guide the work is a priority for their initiative.

Although most Smart Beginnings directors recognized the importance of system design, some partners and staff may lack a full understanding of the range of activities necessary for designing an effective and efficient early childhood system.
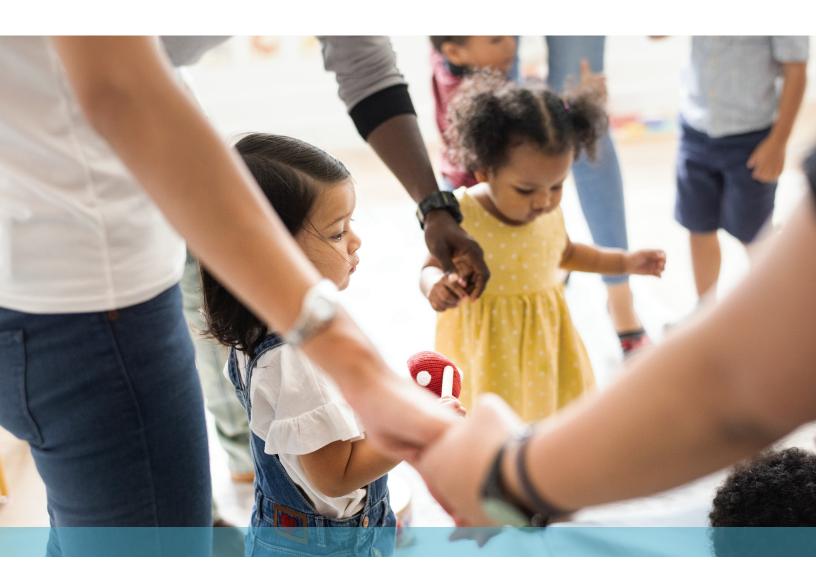
Although many initiatives documented their priorities and strategies in a strategic or school readiness plan, few Smart Beginnings leaders discussed participating in other important aspects of strategic planning and system design, such as using data to track the objectives in the strategic plan, sharing the plan with stakeholders, or conducting community needs assessments to inform the plan (Appendix B). In addition, few initiatives reported engaging families in their systems-building planning efforts. VECF can use the strategy map to help Smart Beginnings leaders understand the full range of system design activities required to strengthen strategic planning efforts. VECF can also find ways to build Smart Beginnings staff and partners' capacity to track benchmarks outlined in their strategic plan using the indicators that accompany the strategy map. Furthermore, VECF can emphasize the importance of routinely revisiting the plan and using data-informed decisions to make revisions.

Success Story: Smart Beginnings staff and partners from one rural community reported that, until a few years ago, they were having difficulty securing funds for their systems-building efforts. With support from VECF, the initiative hired a consultant to help them build a regional framework for early childhood that informed the creation of a data-driven strategic plan. The strategic plan led to securing funds from a foundation that have supported planning and coordination for their early childhood system.

The availability of resources influenced the degree to which Smart Beginnings initiatives could engage in system design activities.

Many Smart Beginnings partners and staff noted that most available funding for their work is earmarked for specific programming and those funds cannot be used for systems-building activities. For example, Smart Beginnings staff and partners from one community reported that, without a significant funding source, they cannot effectively engage in systems-level improvements because they are focused on filling gaps for providers and improving provider quality through trainings and technical assistance. Smart Beginnings initiatives would benefit from dedicated funding for local systems planning so they can focus on identifying and addressing system gaps. Improved access to data, stronger strategic planning, and increased tracking of progress would also allow local entities and VECF to document the positive impact of early childhood systems-building activities on systems-level outcomes, which could then be shared with stakeholders across the Commonwealth.
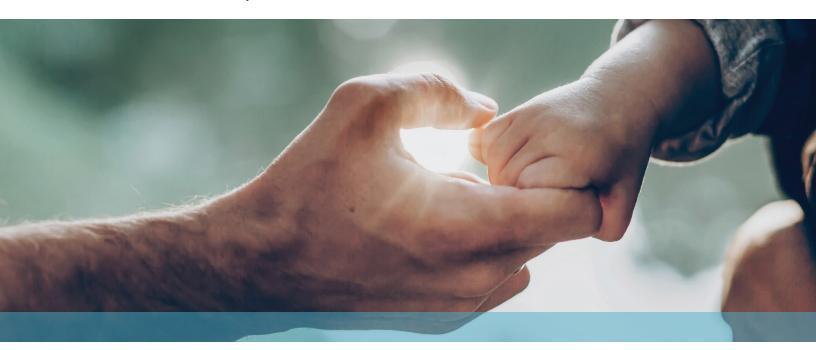
Systems Building Amidst Extraordinary Challenges and Opportunities

As Virginia's Smart Beginnings communities strive to create robust local early childhood systems to promote positive experiences for children and families, they also are experiencing extraordinary levels of 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, and recent events have provided a stark reminder that the legacy of racial injustice continues to bestow privilege on some while limiting opportunities for others.

Although these challenges will not be solved simply or quickly, we must also recognize the urgency of supporting the current generation of Virginia's youngest residents during the most sensitive period in their development. Strong local early childhood systems can help the Commonwealth's children and families weather these crises, for example by mobilizing their networks of diverse stakeholders and leveraging their capacity to disseminate critical information. But local systems need broad and sustained support to reach their full potential.

The information in this report indicates that, although each 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 creative and influential advocates across sectors, and addressing all aspects of the early childhood system.

With the support of state government, VECF, and local stakeholders, local initiatives are building the awareness and infrastructure needed to maximize their communities' support for young children and families. These efforts have laid a strong foundation, but they need ongoing support to ensure that all Virginia's children are prepared for success in school and beyond.

Appendices

Appendix A: Methodology

Smart Beginnings Community Survey

All 17 Smart Beginnings directors completed an online survey in October 2019 (approximately 45 minutes). The survey was designed by SRI Education in consultation with VECF. Survey items addressed systems-building goals; supports from VECF that strengthened efforts to make progress toward those goals; facilitators and barriers to implementing activities and strategies in Smart Beginnings initiatives; systems, child, and family outcomes and data sources to track progress on accomplishing those outcomes; community improvements that resulted from Smart Beginnings initiative efforts; composition of Smart Beginnings staff members and consultants; Smart Beginnings leadership council members; and involvement from Smart Beginnings partnership organizations. SRI staff conducted descriptive analyses (e.g., frequencies, medians, means) that allowed the research team to identify trends across the 17 Smart Beginnings directors' responses. Surveys were not intended to evaluate people's abilities or performance.

Interviews with Smart Beginnings Staff and Partners

To complement the survey data, VECF purposefully selected the eight Smart Beginnings initiatives to participate in interviews to reflect the diversity of communities across the Commonwealth and the wide range of Smart Beginnings strategies and activities. The interviews included Smart Beginnings directors, representatives from Smart Beginnings leadership councils or boards of directors, fiscal agents, local government, school divisions, nonprofit organizations, child-care agencies including Head Start, business and philanthropy, and higher education. SRI staff interviewed 53 individuals (44 in-person, 9 by phone) across the eight Smart Beginnings initiatives. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, and each lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

SRI staff analyzed data using a template organized by the six systems building components (cross-sector collaboration, communication and engagement, financing, quality standards/evidence-based practices, data systems, and system design) and captured additional themes that emerged during interviews. Using the template, the SRI team recorded supporting evidence for each theme and determined the degree of consensus and variability across respondents. In reporting the data, we used the following classifications: few refers to 1 or 2 initiatives, some refers to 3 or 4 initiatives, many refers to 5 or 6 initiatives, and most refers to 7 or 8 initiatives. The interview findings do not generalize beyond the project participants, and the interviews may not have addressed all activities and strategies being undertaken by the Smart Beginnings initiatives.

Follow-Up Collaboration Survey with Interview Respondents

The Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory (Second Edition)[6] was administered to 53 Smart Beginnings staff and partners from eight local Smart Beginnings initiatives who participated in an in-depth qualitative interview with SRI staff. A link to the Wilder Inventory was sent to interview participants in an email the day after the interview was conducted. Of the 53 persons asked to participate, 43 submitted answers to each section of the inventory and one participant completed approximately half of the inventory. SRI staff conducted descriptive analyses (e.g., frequencies, medians, means) which allowed the research team to identify trends across the Smart Beginnings staff and partner responses.

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6 From Collaboration: What makes it work? (p. 37), by P. Mattessich, M. Murray-Close, and B. Monsey, 2001, Saint Paul, MN: Wilder Publishing Center.

Appendix B: Systems Building Goals of Smart Beginnings Initiatives, as Reported by Smart Beginnings Directors

Early childhood systems building key component and related goals	% of directors who report focusing on goal "a lot" or it was "a main focus"
N = 17	
Cross-sector collaboration	**88%[a]**
Build positive relationships among stakeholders	82%
Increase public-private collaboration and coordination of specific strategies and or initiatives	71%
Communication	**100%**
Promote clear communication across and among stakeholders	65%
Promote consistent messaging on the importance of 0-5	53%
Financing	**88%**
Secure new funding by leveraging existing funding or pursuing new grants	76%
Develop sustainable funding models	71%
Quality standards/evidence-based practices	**88%**
Develop systems that promote use of high-quality practices and standards	82%
Align strategies with efforts of existing quality improvement networks	71%
Data systems	**65%**
Improve use of data to communicate with stakeholders	65%
Improve data collection efforts	59%
System design	**76%**
Produce and regularly update a plan to coordinate services for young children in your community	59%
Identify and track shared targets, outcomes, and accountability across agencies	35%

[a] The shaded rows represent the percentage of Smart Beginnings directors who reported that their initiative focused on **at least one** specific goal "a lot" or it was "a main focus" of their work within a given component area.

Appendix C: Instruments

Smart Beginnings Community Survey

Background Information

1. **Please verify the following information about your Smart Beginnings (SB) initiative and make any corrections, as needed.**
   a. Name of SB initiative
   b. Name of SB director/ lead staff
   c. Fiscal agent

Early Childhood Systems building Components

These next questions are about what your Smart Beginnings initiative is doing to strengthen your local/regional early childhood system. We will be asking you questions about six components of an early childhood systems building initiative: cross-sector collaboration, communication, financing, systems design, quality standards/evidence-based practices, and data systems.

2. **Over the past <u>2 years</u>, to what extent has achieving the following <u>cross-sector collaboration</u> goals been a focus of your SB initiative's work?**

	This was not a focus	This was a minor focus of our work	We focused on this a fair amount	We focused on this a lot	This was a main focus of our work
a. Establish a comprehensive, cross-sector, non-partisan collaborative leadership structure of early childhood system stakeholders to engage in coordinated planning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Build positive relationships among stakeholders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Increase public-private collaboration and coordination of specific strategies and/or initiatives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Map available services in the community and facilitate cross agency referrals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Develop local leaders and a leadership pipeline	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

[If the respondent chooses, "We focus on this a lot" or "This is a main focus of our work" for a specific item in question 2, then those items only should appear in question 3.]

3. **Over the past 2 years, to what extent have VECF supports (e.g., technical assistance, research expertise, peer learning networks, funding) strengthened your SB initiative's efforts to make progress toward accomplishing the following cross-sector collaboration goals?**

	N/A, did not receive support	Did not strengthen	Minimally strengthened	Somewhat strengthened	Strengthened	Substantially strengthened
a. Establish a comprehensive, cross-sector, non-partisan collaborative leadership structure of early childhood system stakeholders to engage in coordinated planning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Build positive relationships among stakeholders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
c. Increase public-private collaboration and coordination of specific strategies and/or initiatives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Map available services in the community and facilitate cross agency referrals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Develop local leaders and a leadership pipeline	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

4. **Over the past 2 years, to what extent has achieving the following communication goals been a focus of your SB initiative's work?**

	This was not a focus	This was a minor focus of our work	We focused on this a fair amount	We focused on this a lot	This was a main focus of our work
a. Promote consistent messaging on the importance of 0-5	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Promote clear communication across and among stakeholders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Increase family knowledge of child development and positive parenting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Increase family awareness of available resources and services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Engage families in communications in order to elevate family voice and leadership	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Engage key leaders with the ability to influence policies and practices	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

[If the respondent chooses, "We focus on this a lot" or "This is a main focus of our work" for a specific item in question 4 then those items only should appear in question 5.]

5. **Over the past 2 years, to what extent have VECF supports (e.g., technical assistance, research expertise, peer learning networks, funding) strengthened your SB initiative's efforts to make progress toward accomplishing the following communication goals?**

	N/A, did not receive support	Did not strengthen	Minimally strengthened	Somewhat strengthened	Strengthened	Substantially strengthened
a. Promote consistent messaging on the importance of 0-5	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Promote clear communication across and among stakeholders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

c. Increase family knowledge of child development and positive parenting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Increase family awareness of available resources and services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Engage families in communications in order to elevate family voice and leadership	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Engage key leaders with the ability to influence policies and practices	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

6. Over the past <u>2 years</u>, to what extent has achieving the following <u>financing</u> goals been a focus of your SB initiative's work?

	This was not a focus	This was a minor focus of our work	We focused on this a fair amount	We focused on this a lot	This was a main focus of our work
a. Integrate funding across programs and/or private and public funding streams to maximize services and resources at the <u>community</u> level	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Integrate funding across public and private <u>funding</u> streams to maximize services and resources at the <u>site</u> level	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Secure new funding by leveraging existing funding or pursuing new grants	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Identify, inventory, or map existing funding and resources to align and maximize their use	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

| | e. Develop sustainable funding models | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

| | f. Engage individuals who hold the purse strings and have decision-making authority | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

[If the respondent chooses, "We focus on this a lot" or "This is a main focus of our work" for a specific item in question 6, then those items only should appear in question 7.]

7. Over the past 2 years, to what extent have VECF supports (e.g., technical assistance, research expertise, peer learning networks, funding) strengthened your SB initiative's efforts to make progress towards the following <u>financing</u> goals?

	N/A, did not receive support	Did not strengthen	Minimally strengthened	Somewhat strengthened	Strengthened	Substantially strengthened
a. Integrate funding across programs and/or private and public funding streams to maximize services and resources at the <u>community</u> level	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Integrate funding across public and private <u>funding</u> streams to maximize services and resources at the <u>site</u> level	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Secure new funding by leveraging existing funding or pursuing new grants	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Identify, inventory, or map existing funding and resources to align and maximize their use	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Develop sustainable funding models	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Engage individuals who hold the purse strings	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

and have decision-making authority

8. **Over the past 2 years, to what extent has achieving the following <u>systems design</u> goals been a focus of your SB initiative's work?**

	This was not a focus	This was a minor focus of our work	We focused on this a fair amount	We focused on this a lot	This was a main focus of our work
a. Conduct community needs assessments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Produce and regularly update a plan to coordinate effective early learning, health, and family support services for young children in your community	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Engage families in system design	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Identify and track shared targets, outcomes, and accountability across agencies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Conduct child/family screenings and assessments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

[If the respondent chooses, "We focus on this a lot" or "This is a main focus of our work" for a specific item in question 8, then those items only should appear in question 9.]

9. **Over the past 2 years, to what extent have VECF supports (e.g., technical assistance, research expertise, peer learning networks, funding) <u>strengthened</u> your SB initiative's efforts to make progress toward the following <u>system design</u> goals?**

	N/A, did not receive support	Did not strengthen	Minimally strengthened	Somewhat strengthened	Strengthened	Substantially strengthened
a. Conduct community needs assessments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Produce and regularly update a plan to coordinate effective early learning, health, and family support services for young	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

children in your
community

c. Engage families in system design	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Identify and track shared targets, outcomes, and accountability across agencies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Conduct child/family screenings and assessments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

10. Over the past 2 years, to what extent has achieving the following goals related to quality standards/evidence-based practices been a focus of your SB initiative's work?

	This was not a focus	This was a minor focus of our work	We focused on this a fair amount	We focused on this a lot	This was a main focus of our work
a. Identify and support implementation of evidence-based practices focused on targeted outcomes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Develop and launch evidence-based programs or services to fill service gaps	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Develop systems that promote use of high-quality practices and standards	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Align strategies with efforts of existing quality improvement networks	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

[If the respondent chooses, "We focus on this a lot" or "This is a main focus of our work" for a specific item in question 10, then those items only should appear in question 11.]

11. Over the past 2 years, to what extent have VECF supports (e.g., technical assistance, research expertise, peer learning networks, funding) strengthened your SB initiative's efforts to make progress toward the following goals related to quality standards/evidence-based practices?

	N/A, did not receive support	Did not strengthen	Minimally strengthened	Somewhat strengthened	Strengthened	Substantially strengthened
a. Identify and support implementation of evidence-based practices focused on targeted outcomes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Develop systems that promote use of high-quality practices	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Align strategies with efforts of existing quality improvement networks	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Convene and coordinate high-quality EC workforce preparation professional development and training	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

12. Over the past 2 years, to what extent have the following <u>data system</u> goals been a focus of your SB initiative's work?

	This was not a focus	This was a minor focus of our work	We focused on this a fair amount	We focused on this a lot	This was a main focus of our work
a. Improve data collection efforts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Improve data utilization efforts (e.g., using data to assess progress on goals, gaps, service utilization and its barriers)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Improve use of data to communicate with stakeholders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Improve data sharing among SB initiative partners	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

e. Build integrated early childhood data for planning, monitoring, and reporting ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

f. Grow capacity to analyze and interpret data as actionable information ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

[If the respondent chooses, "We focus on this a lot" or "This is a main focus of our work" for a specific item in question 12, then those items only should appear in question 13.]

13. Over the past 2 years, to what extent have VECF supports (e.g., technical assistance, research expertise, peer learning networks, funding) strengthened your SB initiative's efforts to make progress towards the following <u>data system</u> goals?

	N/A, did not receive support	Did not strengthen	Minimally strengthened	Somewhat strengthened	Strengthened	Substantially strengthened
a. Improve data collection efforts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Improve data utilization efforts (e.g., using data to assess progress on goals, gaps, service utilization and its barriers)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Improve use of data to communicate with stakeholders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Improve data sharing among SB initiative partners	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Build integrated early childhood data for planning, monitoring, and reporting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Grow capacity and expertise to analyze and interpret data as actionable information	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Other Supports from VECF

14. Over the past 2 years, how <u>essential</u> have the following VECF activities and supports been t<u>o the success of your Smart Beginnings initiative</u>?

	Not at all essential	A little essential	Moderately essential	Essential	Very essential
a. VECF's facilitation of coordination with agencies at the state level to support better coordination of similar agencies at the local level.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. VECF's efforts to connect our SB initiative with experts that support us to make evidence- and data-informed decisions and investments.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. VECF's support of financial resources either through direct grants or identifying and accessing other revenue streams.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. VECF's provision of technical assistance and tools to pursue early childhood systems building.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. VECF's efforts to tailor its technical assistance to the unique needs and resources of our community.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. VECF's efforts to connect us with other Smart Beginnings initiatives to share knowledge and ideas.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

<u>Facilitators and Barriers</u>

15. To what extent are each of the following factors currently a facilitator or barrier to implementing activities and strategies in your Smart Beginnings initiative?

	Strong barrier	Somewhat of a barrier	Neither a barrier nor facilitator	Somewhat of a facilitator	Strong facilitator
a. Funding available to coordinate systems building	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Presence of services (e.g., preschool and child-care slots, home visiting), for children and families in the community	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Person-to-person relationships and/or connections with the SB initiative	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Initiative member turnover/stability	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Agencies' willingness to share information/data about clients	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Staff time for collaborating	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g. Prior collaboration among team members	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
h. Agency support to work together	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
i. Different/similar professional cultures	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	This was not a focus	We focused on this only a little	We focused on this a fair amount	We focused on this a lot	This was a main focus of our work
j. Different/similar program goals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
k. Different/similar policy or advocacy goals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
l. Different/similar populations of interest	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
m. Other (specify)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Outcomes

16. Over the past 2 years, to what extent has your Smart Beginnings initiative focused on the following <u>early childhood system outcomes</u>?

	This was not a focus	We focused on this only a little	We focused on this a fair amount	We focused on this a lot	This was a main focus of our work
a. Improved integration of early childhood services and supports	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Improved effectiveness of early childhood services and supports	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Increased investments to fill system gaps	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Integrated investments to fill system gaps	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Increased utilization of early childhood services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. More equitable access to and utilization of early childhood services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g. Improved quality of early childhood services, programs, and workforce	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

h. Other (specify): ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

17. *[If the item is selected as "We focus on this a lot" or "This is a main focus of our work" for question 16, ask question 17 for those same items only]*

	Do you track data to understand to what extent you're accomplishing this outcome?		If YES, what data do you collect? (open-ended response)	If NO, how do you understand the extent you're accomplishing this outcome? (open-ended response)
	Yes	No		
a. Improved integration of early childhood services and supports	☐	☐		
b. Improved effectiveness of early childhood services and supports	☐	☐		
c. Increased investments to fill system gaps	☐	☐		
d. Integrated investments to fill system gaps	☐	☐		
e. Increased access to and utilization of early childhood services	☐	☐		
f. More equitable access to and utilization of early childhood services	☐	☐		
g. Improved quality of early childhood	☐	☐		

services,
programs, and
workforce

h. Other (specify):   ☐   ☐

18. To what extent is your Smart Beginnings community focused on improving the following <u>child outcomes</u>?

	This was not a focus	We focused on this only a little	We focused on this a fair amount	We focused on this a lot	This was a main focus of our work
a. Healthy births	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Young children's cognitive development	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Young children's physical development	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Young children's social-emotional development	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Increased school readiness	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Later educational, health, and economic success	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g. Other child/family outcome(s) (Specify)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

19. *[If the item is selected as "We focus on this a lot" or "This is a main focus of our work" for question 19, ask question 20 for those* **same** *items only]*

	Do you track data to understand to what extent you're accomplishing this outcome?		If YES, what data do you collect? (open-ended response)	If NO, how do you understand the extent you're accomplishing this outcome? (open-ended response)
	Yes	No		
a. Healthy births	☐	☐		
b. Young children's cognitive development	☐	☐		
c. Young children's physical development	☐	☐		
d. Young children's social-emotional development	☐	☐		
e. Increased school readiness	☐	☐		
f. Later educational, health, and economic success	☐	☐		
g. Other child/family outcome(s) Specify	☐	☐		

20. To what extent is your Smart Beginnings community focused on improving the following <u>family outcomes</u>?

	This was not a focus	We focused on this only a little	We focused on this a fair amount	We focused on this a lot	This was a main focus of our work
a. Family well-being: food security, safe and stable housing, success in the workforce, and economic mobility	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Knowledgeable about child development	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Supportive relationships between caregivers and children	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Engaged in children's early learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

21. *[If the item is selected as "We focus on this a lot" or "This is a main focus of our work" for question 21, ask question 22 for those same items only]*

	Do you track data to understand to what extent you're accomplishing this outcome?		If YES, what data do you collect? (open-ended response)	If NO, how do you understand the extent you're accomplishing this outcome? (open-ended response)
	Yes	No		
a. Family well-being: food security, safe and stable housing, success in the workforce, and economic mobility	☐	☐		
b. Knowledgeable about child development	☐	☐		
c. Supportive relationships between caregivers and children	☐	☐		
d. Engaged in children's early learning	☐	☐		

22. Over the past 2 years, to what extent has your Smart Beginnings initiative work resulted in the following improvements in your community? (Rate each from *"no effect"* to *"major effect."*)

	No effect	Minimal effect	Somewhat of an effect	Moderate effect	Major effect
a. Increased family awareness of available early care and education supports and services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Increased access to services for historically underserved populations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Increased utilization of existing services by families	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Increased the skills of the early childhood workforce	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Increased the status of the early childhood workforce, such as through compensation strategies and incentives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Increased cultural responsiveness of services to appropriately serve diverse groups (e.g., integrating meaningful attention to the cultural identities of participants and staff, and to the ways culture can shape people's experiences of trauma)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g. Increased use of trauma-informed care	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
h. Increased use of evidence-based practices in early childhood health,	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

educational, and social programs

i. Better coordination of services and supports	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
j. Enhanced referrals (e.g., streamlined enrollment, increased linkages)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
k. Expanded service and support options (e.g., increased access, increased capacity, increased convenience)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
l. Increased sustainability of services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
m. Other (specify):	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Smart Beginnings Staff Members and Consultants

23. Please list the name, position, and full-time equivalent (FTE) for each paid <u>Smart Beginnings staff member or consultant</u> in your initiative.

Name	Position title	Full-time equivalent (FTE) (For example, .5 would mean that the staff member works 50% time or 20 hours per week).	SB staff member OR SB consultant? Select one.
a.			
b.			
c.			
d.			
e.			
f. …			

Smart Beginnings Leadership Council

24. **Who is the chair of your Smart Beginnings Leadership Council and what organization and sector are they affiliated with?**

    a. Name of Chair:

              _____

    b. Organizational affiliation and position title:

              _____

    c. Sector: *(Dropdown menu options – business community, philanthropic community, school division, early care and education, higher education, local government, other partner organization)*

25. **Please select <u>up to five individuals on your SB initiative's leadership council</u> who are the most influential and active with respect to SB initiative goal development and decision-making.**

    • **Please list their name and organizational affiliation and select what sector they represent.**
    • **You may also provide any information about why these individuals are perceived as being particularly influential for goal development and decision-making within your SB initiative.**

Name (Respondent fills in)	Organizational affiliation (Respondent fills in)	Sector (Dropdown menu options – business community, philanthropic community, school division, early care and education, local government, other partner organization)	Notes (Respondent fills in)
a. Leadership Council Member #1			
b. Leadership Council Member #2			
c. Leadership Council Member #3			
d. Leadership Council Member #4			
e. Leadership Council Member #5			

Smart Beginnings Partner Organizations

The following questions are about your Smart Beginnings <u>partner organizations</u> and their level of involvement in your Smart Beginnings initiative.

26. Please complete the table below by doing the following:

- **Type the name of each partner organization on its own row**
- **For each partner organization, select from the dropdown menu the sector the organization/agency belongs to.**
- **For each organizational partner, select from the dropdown menu 'yes' or 'no' to indicate the ways in which the partner is involved in your SB initiative.**
- **If you would like to, please provide any additional information about a specific SB partner organization in the notes column.**

Name of partner organization (respondent fills in)	Sector	Actively participates in meetings (yes/no)	Works together with other partners toward shared outcomes (yes/no)	Shares data (yes/no)	Financially supports SB (yes/no)	Represents/ promotes/ advocates for ECE/SB in the community with key decision makers (yes/no)	Notes (respondent fills in)
a. SB partner organization 1							
b. SB partner organization 2							
c. SB partner organization 3							
d. SB partner organization 4							
e. SB partner organization 5							
f. SB partner organization 6							
g. SB partner organization 7							
h. SB partner organization 8							
i. SB partner organization 9							
j. SB partner organization 10							

Smart Beginnings Systems- and Capacity-Building Outcomes

Interview Protocol

Introduction and Purpose of Interview

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. We are talking with you and participants in other Smart Beginnings initiatives to learn about your key priorities for your early childhood system, activities to support those priorities, VECF's role in your community, and the impact of your work and challenges you've faced. We will also be talking with some of your colleagues at [*name of local Smart Beginnings initiative*]. The interview is intended to gather information about local systems building initiatives and not to evaluate individuals in their capabilities or performance.

This interview will take approximately 60 minutes. We might ask questions that do not apply to your community. If so, please just let us know that this is the case. Aggregate findings will be shared with VECF and its stakeholders, the Smart Beginnings network, and members of the Virginia Legislature, and will be made available publicly. We may include direct quotes from these interviews in a legislative brief. We will not use a quote from you or identify you by name unless you give permission first. Other than possibly reporting a direct quote with your permission, we will report the data from this interview in a manner that does not reveal your identity.

Consent Process

Have each respondent read and sign the consent form. Ask permission to audio-record the conversation.

_____

I'd like to start by asking about your role in [*name of local Smart Beginnings (SB) initiative*].

1. Can you describe your role as [*title*]?

The first set of questions are about the key priorities for your Smart Beginnings *initiative*.

2. I'd like to talk about your Smart Beginnings initiative's top priorities. In your Year-End Report to VECF you listed the following activities [*pre-populate from Year-End Report*]:

   System-building activity 1:

   System-building activity 2:

   System-building activity 3:

   System-building activity 4:

System-building activity 5:

Which of these is your Smart Beginnings initiative's top priority, or the one that you're currently putting most effort toward?

3. Please tell me a little about why this is your top priority.

4. What is your goal for [*Priority 1*]? What would success on [*Priority 1*] look like?

5. Can you describe how you're addressing [*Priority 1*]?
    Probes:
    a. *What specific activities are you implementing?*
    b. *Are you using any evidence-based practices to implement this activity?*

6. Which of your partners are supporting this priority? How are they contributing or supporting the work?

7. How would you characterize the level of awareness of stakeholders about your work on [*Priority 1*]?

    Probe (if not clear): For which community members is your work on [Priority 1] relevant? How do you communicate with the larger community about [Priority 1]? Whom do you communicate with?

8. How are you monitoring progress toward meeting your goal for this priority?
    Probes:
    a. *Are you collecting data? If so, what data are you collecting (child, community, system level)? How often?*
    b. *Do you gather feedback from stakeholders? Which ones? How?*

9. How does support from VECF help with this work specifically?
    Probe: TA, research expertise, peer learning networks, funding

10. How is the work going so far?

    a. What successes have you had? Can you give an example of how this effort has impacted your community?

    b. What challenges have you faced? How have you tried to address these challenges?

Now I have some questions about your work with VECF.

11. What types of VECF support do you find to be most valuable and why?
[Prepopulate with survey results to probe why support for certain activities strengthened the work and what type of support they received (i.e., technical assistance, research expertise, peer learning networks, funding).]
Probe: How specifically has this support strengthened your work in building your early childhood system?

12. What assistance from VECF was less helpful? Why? What would have made it more helpful?

13. What additional support would you like to receive?

14. As part of your Smart Beginnings work, do you participate in "Building Excellence" peer learning activities?

(If yes):

    a. What have you learned from your participation?

    b. How has this peer learning benefitted your community?

15. Do you have any informal communications with colleagues in Smart Beginnings initiatives in other communities? Have they been helpful? How?

This is our final set of questions! In closing I'd like you to reflect on how your work with Smart Beginnings has progressed and the impact of your efforts so far.

16. Looking back at the work of *[local SMART BEGINNINGS initiative]*
    a. What would you say has gone especially well?

       [Record response and then follow with probes about facilitators reported in the survey: In the survey, you reported that [facilitator] is a facilitator to collaboration and implementing activities and strategies in your Smart Beginnings initiative. Why is (facilitator) a facilitator? How has it contributed to outcomes for your early childhood system and your community?]

    b. What have been the barriers to achieving your goals?

[*Record response and then follow with probes about barriers reported in the survey:* In the survey, you reported that [barrier] is a barrier to collaboration and implementing activities and strategies in your Smart Beginnings initiative. Why is [barrier] a barrier? How did you try to overcome it?]

17. Please describe how you think having a local Smart Beginnings initiative benefits ...

    a. Local agencies and organizations that support children birth to 5 and their families?

    b. Local caregivers, educators, and providers who support young children and families?

    c. Young children and families?

    d. Businesses/employers?

    e. Your local Smart Beginnings community?

    f. The Commonwealth?

18. How has your early childhood system changed because of Smart Beginnings?

19. What lessons would you share with other Smart Beginnings communities about how to design and implement an effective and efficient early childhood system?

20. If there were no [*name of local Smart Beginnings* initiative] and no support from VECF with early childhood systems building, what would be different for children and families in your community?

    Probe: What is unique or distinctive about Smart Beginning's role in your community?

Those are all of the questions that I have today. We would like to email you a brief survey for you to fill out in the next few days about how your Smart Beginnings initiative members work together. It should take no more than 10 minutes. Would that be alright? Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses

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