

FAIRFAX COUNTY EQUITABLE SCHOOL READINESS STRATEGIC PLAN

FOREWORD

Fairfax County is committed to ensuring a successful future for all its residents, built on the pillars of a strong educational system, a thriving economy, and ongoing equitable opportunity for its diverse community.

The path forward begins with a countywide, shared commitment to the school readiness of all children in Fairfax County, regardless of economic, cultural or ethnic background. Research tells us that when young children have access to high quality early learning opportunities, they do well in school and in life. Every child in Fairfax County deserves the opportunity to enter kindergarten primed to achieve his or her maximum potential, as this is the key to the county's continued ability to thrive as an economic leader in the greater Washington metropolitan area.

As Fairfax County's demographics shift, ensuring children's school readiness requires enhanced solutions, including increased commitment to equity, greater coordination across sectors, and data-driven policymaking linked directly to meet family needs.

Families, schools, early childhood educators, local government and communities play a pivotal role in helping young children enter kindergarten ready for academic and life-long success. Working together, these partners are positioned to build an equitable, coordinated and comprehensive system that ensures young children in Fairfax County are ready to be successful in kindergarten and throughout their lives.

Through a landscape review that involved a broad group of stakeholders, with a strong focus on family perspectives, as well as through a series of planning discussions engaging representatives from early childhood, school, county and community programs, Fairfax County's Equitable School Readiness Strategic Planning process brought forth several key findings:

- Gaps in information about children and families make coordinating the demand and supply for school readiness services challenging.
- There is a need for greater coordination to support quality early childhood education and the professional growth of early childhood educators.
- More work is needed to ensure a cohesive system of school readiness supports that maintains an equity focus, is data driven and is directly linked to family needs.

To address these challenges, the Fairfax County Equitable School Readiness Strategic Plan has identified five core strategies for implementation, 2017-2022. They focus on:

- Partnerships with families
- High quality experiences for all children
- Well-prepared professional educators
- Using data to make decisions
- Building public awareness

While the Strategic Plan's goals are ambitious, the county is well-positioned to build on a solid foundation of partnerships, commitment to the goals of One Fairfax, the goals and strategies of our public school system and the aspirations of families to move the early learning needle forward and achieve our vision of every child entering kindergarten ready for a lifetime of success, happiness and achievement.

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Babies and young children learn and develop at rapid rates well before they reach kindergarten. Research and experience have demonstrated in Fairfax County and communities across the country that when young children have access to high-quality early learning and developmental opportunities, they do better in school and life. Research has shown that children who begin kindergarten with a strong social, emotional, and cognitive foundation are more likely to reach high levels of academic achievement, less likely to drop out of school, more likely to earn higher incomes, and less likely to experience negative health factors.¹ These outcomes benefit not only individual children and families, but also contribute to the enduring well-being of the community. This reality is increasingly focusing attention on making sure that all young children and their families—regardless of income, neighborhood in which they live, or ethnicity—have access to high-quality early childhood supports and services.

Fairfax County's population has grown, become more diverse and is home to residents of varied income levels, races, ethnicities, languages, and abilities. Fairfax County's Equitable Growth Profile identifies that "poverty and a growing number of people who are working poor are both on the rise in the county and are most severe for communities of color."² Approximately one in five children birth to five years of age are economically disadvantaged (living below 200 percent of the federal poverty level). Responding to demographics and with the shared recognition of the importance of early development, Fairfax County is committed to leveraging its resources to close the achievement gap and provide equitable and excellent school readiness supports to families and young children. County and School leaders recognize that for all young children to thrive, some children—and their families—will need more support than others.

"One Fairfax can only be realized with an intentional racial and social equity policy at its core for all publicly delivered services. A racial and social equity policy provides both the direction and means to eliminate disparities, and work together to build a vibrant and opportunity-rich society for all"

- One Fairfax Resolution

In fall 2016, the Fairfax County Office for Children, Fairfax County Public Schools and the county's School Readiness Community Collaborative Council teamed up to create an equitable school readiness strategic plan to ensure that the county's school readiness resources best support those who need them most. Reflecting the goals of One Fairfax, which lifts up equity as a core policy principle, this resulting plan represents a deeply held and widely shared commitment to

¹ Heckman, J., et al. *Early Childhood Education*. University of Chicago: 2015.

² PolicyLink and USC Program for Environmental & Regional Equity. June 2015. Equitable Growth Profile of Fairfax County.

and strategies for assuring that Fairfax County's youngest residents are supported from the start to be successful in the future.

School readiness results from a set of interconnected physical, social, emotional, and academic experiences and supports that begin before a child is born and continue through his or her transition to kindergarten. While many supports center on the individual child, others concentrate on providing financial and other assistance to families so that they can ensure their children's healthy development and successful future.

The Fairfax County Equitable School Readiness Strategic Plan lays out a vision and roadmap for ensuring that all young children in Fairfax County have the supports they need to be successful in school and beyond. These strategies and actions were jointly developed by a diverse group of school readiness stakeholders and informed by families and community members across Fairfax County. Successful implementation will similarly rely on the collaborative efforts and energy of stakeholders across the county – families, professionals, government agencies and their leaders, non-profit organizations, businesses, faith-based institutions, schools, and others will all play multiple and important roles in creating a system of supports that ensure that all young children are set for success.

Equitable School Readiness Strategic Plan

School Readiness Vision

All children enter kindergarten at their optimal developmental level with equitable opportunity for success.

School Readiness Mission

Families, communities, schools and the county work together to build an equitable, coordinated and comprehensive system that ensures young children in Fairfax County are ready to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.

School Readiness Goals

- **All children are ready.** All children have the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual skills they need to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.
- **All families are ready.** All families provide their children with secure and supportive relationships and environments; promote physical and mental health; and foster curiosity and love of learning.
- **All professionals are ready.** All early childhood professionals in the community and schools recognize, reinforce, and extend children and families' strengths; are responsive to cultural values and individual differences; promote equity; and support families as respected partners in promoting children's optimal development.
- **All schools are ready.** All schools know, welcome and appreciate children and families' thoughts, aspirations and unique journey to kindergarten, and provide a high-quality learning environment for all children.
- **Our community is ready.** Our whole community, including families, businesses, faith-based organizations, early childhood professionals, community groups, libraries, schools, government and others, work together to make our community a place where every child thrives.

Strategies

1. Establish meaningful partnerships with families to grow school readiness opportunities in all communities and support children's optimal development in all settings.
2. Provide equitable offerings of high-quality early development and learning experiences and related school readiness supports throughout the county.
3. Foster quality and effective professional learning in all early childhood programs and services.
4. Promote equity-focused planning and decision making, as well as shared accountability, through use of data.
5. Nurture a whole community commitment to school success for all children.

Strategy One

Establish meaningful partnerships with families to grow school readiness opportunities in all communities and support children's optimal development in all settings.

Indicator of Success:

Families are part of a connected community, have the resources they need to support their children and inform ongoing school readiness efforts in the county.

Actions

1. Listen to, assess and understand the needs of families to build trusting relationships, by:
 - Communicating regularly with families in their native languages and with knowledge of and respect for diverse cultures;
 - Utilizing FCPS Parent Liaisons and community ambassadors to better understand families' cultural norms, aspirations for their children, and preferences for school readiness supports in neighborhoods across the county;
2. Create processes for gathering and incorporating information from and about families in early childhood system planning and decision-making. Consistently work to understand the unique needs and preferences of Fairfax County families.
3. Involve families as partners with other school readiness stakeholders (educators, principals, policy makers, etc.) in data analysis and review, action planning, decision making, implementation, and evaluation.
4. Develop a system to create, sponsor, and support a cadre of parent leaders/community ambassadors who support other families' access to information, social networks, and resources related to school readiness, child development or other concrete needs.
5. Partner with families to support children's executive function skills through Mind in the Making and other initiatives and strategies.
6. Establish parent/family centers in convenient locations that:
 - Introduce families with children aged birth to eight to their neighborhoods, the larger Fairfax community and the many resources available for families.
 - Partner with and provide families with children aged birth to eight with information about child development and connect them with social networks and concrete supports where needed.
7. Parent liaisons in FCPS will implement best practices for partnering with families.

Measures Include

- Number of family leader/community ambassadors identified, trained, and working in communities each year for next three years (set targets by geography and number).

- Number of families indicating the supports they receive from family leaders, parent liaisons and/or other county and FCPS staff are useful and high quality (as measured by survey, disaggregated by family income level).
- Number of new parent/family centers established and utilization rate.



Strategy Two

Provide equitable offerings of high-quality early development and learning experiences and related school readiness supports throughout the county.

Indicators of Success:

Children birth to eight have positive early childhood experiences and the supports they need in all settings. Disparities in access, affordability and quality are eliminated and the achievement gap is closed.

Actions

1. Implement the Early Developmental Instrument (EDI)³ to understand the quality and availability of school readiness supports and services.
 - Pilot the EDI in identified low child opportunity neighborhoods and use the results to expand the supply and affordability of quality early childhood programs, family strengthening, preventative health, mental health, dental health, and early intervention programs and services.
 - Adopt lessons learned from the pilot in county-wide practices.
2. Increase the supply, access and affordability of quality early childhood programs.
3. In coordination with Healthy Minds Fairfax and other partners, increase the supply, access and affordability of family strengthening and infant and early childhood mental health services, including existing programs (e.g., home visiting programs) and new programs and supports that address identified needs.
4. Increase the supply, access and affordability of preventative health programs and services.
5. Increase awareness of and access to early intervention programs and services, including existing and new programs and supports that address identified needs.
6. Expand and promote the use of developmental and social emotional screeners (e.g., ASQ-3, ASQ-SE, AEPS, DECA, ACES, etc.) among all early childhood programs, and use screener data to inform the provision of services for individual children and families.
7. Create an equity-focused culture among stakeholders and the public to include using an equity tool to guide decision-making for all early childhood programs, services, and policies.
8. Expand and leverage Neighborhood School Readiness Teams to promote effective coordination of school readiness supports and services in neighborhoods throughout the county.

³ The EDI is the only tool currently available that results in maps showing young children's strengths and vulnerabilities as populations in their neighborhoods. Rather than individual children, the EDI assesses neighborhood school readiness experiences and creates actionable data about child outcomes and program effectiveness and availability for community leaders. For more information, visit: edi.offordcentre.com.

9. Create a system for prevention-focused early childhood mental health consultation services to support children's successful participation in early childhood education programs and eliminate expulsion and suspension practices.
10. Expand the number of programs participating in the Virginia Quality Initiative
11. Expand the availability of useful information, peer connections, and other supports for families, co-workers or other adults caring for young children (0-8) in informal settings part-time, full-time, and during traditional or non-traditional hours.

Measures Include

- Increased number of children served through publicly subsidized early childhood programs, early childhood health and mental health services, and early intervention programs and services.
- More children meet age-appropriate developmental expectations (EDI and developmental screener results).
- Increased capacity of local programs and services to address the needs of young children and their families (EDI results).
- Increased access to early childhood mental health services and support (link to Healthy Minds Fairfax).

Strategy Three

Foster quality and effective professional learning in all early childhood programs and services.

Indicators of Success:

Early childhood educators demonstrate the competencies to provide developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive experiences for young children and their families. Demonstrated competencies are linked to compensation.

Actions

1. Establish a countywide early childhood professional learning coordinating council to support professional learning and alignment with quality indicators within the early childhood community.
2. Adopt a set of professional learning (PL) competencies (academic, social-emotional, physical, use of assessments, etc.) around developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive expectations for early childhood educators and service providers and that address implicit biases.⁴ Develop a Professional Learning Competencies rubric and plan that educators can use to set and track progress against goals.
3. Align shared PL opportunities and encourage cross-program relationship development, learning and collaboration across organizations and types of school readiness programs and services to foster connections and mutual respect among school-based, center-based and family child care educators.
4. Develop a system of professional learning opportunities in multiple languages and promote equity in offerings to ensure consistent quality in all languages.
5. Develop consultation and support systems to strengthen early childhood educator competencies in recognizing and addressing childhood trauma and promoting children's social emotional growth and executive functioning skills, thereby preventing expulsions and/or suspensions of children from early childhood programs.
6. Pursue strategies that link competencies and effective practices to higher compensation, including benefits.
7. Promote ongoing and differentiated professional learning that supports early childhood educators in mastering core competencies and meeting their individual professional learning goals, including through:
 - Opportunities for reflective practice
 - Work with coaches and mentors

⁴ Note: These can be based off of one or some combination of existing competencies developed by the State of Virginia, National Association for the Education of Young Children, Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, and others.

- Participation in scaffolded professional learning opportunities covering a range of foundational competencies

Measures Include

- Number of and participation rates in cross-sector, shared learning opportunities and experiences (attendance logs at meetings/trainings).
- Number of professional learning opportunities offered in multiple languages and diverse neighborhoods (review of materials from largest professional learning organizations).
- Percentage of professional learning opportunities that are aligned with the Professional Learning Competencies rubric.
- Reported and/or observed changes in practice made by professional learning participants following participation (six month and/or one year follow up surveys, interviews and/or on-site observations [e.g. Classroom Assessment Scoring System]).

Strategy Four

Promote equity-focused planning and decision making, as well as shared accountability, through the use of data.

Indicators of Success:

A cohesive system of school readiness supports is accessible, equitable, data driven and directly linked to family needs.

Actions

1. Create a comprehensive plan for a county-wide school readiness data system informed by parents and other stakeholders that uses data related to early childhood programs and services including:
 - Supply and demand;
 - Program quality;
 - Population-level child and family outcomes.
2. Create a dashboard and communication strategy to regularly share data and communicate progress and results across all partners and stakeholders to:
 - Inform key stakeholders, including the public, about existing and needed school readiness supports;
 - Validate the data;
 - Empower community members and leaders to make decisions based on data;
 - Allow for increased transparency; and
 - Report on progress and results.
3. Develop an early childhood data profile for public and private programs to support children's successful kindergarten transitions, to best meet each child's needs, and to inform and strengthen the school readiness system of supports.

Measures Include

- Number of visits to data dashboard.
- Higher rates of data sharing by community programs.
- Diverse participation in neighborhood planning and decision making, including families and all other stakeholders (family and neighborhood citizen participation in local early learning planning teams).

Strategy Five

Nurture a whole community commitment to school success for all children.

Indicators of Success:

All segments of the community are engaged in school readiness efforts and dedicated public funding ensures that equitable programs and services are provided for children birth to eight and their families.

Actions

1. Develop a mass communication strategy and launch a large-scale school readiness public awareness campaign—modeled after a public health campaign approach—in multiple languages and multiple formats, to inform all families about the importance of positive early development and how to promote it, as well as what equity means in a school readiness context.
2. Create an on-line, one-stop communications hub that includes all school readiness resources available in the county.
3. Build community support for the creation of a dedicated public Children’s Fund to support ongoing programs and services for children.
4. Partner with families, businesses, faith-based organizations, early childhood professionals, community groups, libraries, schools, government and others to collectively develop strategies and structures that build community, social connections, and the sense of belonging and support for all Fairfax County families (e.g., learning about child development via social interactions at parks, malls, schools, etc.).

Measures Include

- Usage rates of county and district school readiness websites (web hits).
- Number and type of public and private partners participating and/or contributing to a public awareness campaign and community-connection activities (partner logs).
- Increased public investment in school readiness programs and supports.

Acknowledgements

The Fairfax County Equitable School Readiness Strategic Plan was shaped thru a collaborative effort including interviews and focus groups with approximately 160 school readiness stakeholders—including families with young children in neighborhoods across the county, county and school leaders and staff, early childhood educators and partnering professionals, community-based non-profits, higher education, and existing committees focused on early childhood health, development and school readiness. This landscape review (see Addendum page 13) provided invaluable information about the county’s existing school readiness supports, how well the county currently supports its youngest residents and their families, where opportunities existed to grow and improve those supports, and informed the pathway for the strategic plan.

A planning team was convened and a smaller operations team met bi-monthly to transform what was discovered about existing supports and family needs into a comprehensive plan for delivering equitable school readiness supports to Fairfax County young children and their families over the next five years.

Recognizing that families have diverse needs, priorities, and preferences for their children’s early learning and care, the planning groups paid special attention to families’ input and worked to craft strategies and activities that ensure that a system of school readiness supports provides families and young children with high-quality opportunities when and where they are needed most. This includes working to ensure that families have clear avenues for partnering in ongoing conversations and decisions about school readiness supports in Fairfax County

The Equitable School Readiness Strategic Plan was made possible with the invaluable input of the community and the commitment of the planning team. With continued momentum and support, the strategic plan represents a vital and sustainable approach for ensuring that young children in Fairfax County will have the equitable supports necessary to begin school fully ready to succeed and thrive.

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Addendum

Summary of Fairfax County School Readiness Landscape Review Key Findings

Fairfax County has embraced school readiness as a key strategy for promoting the long-term success of its children birth to eight, families, and community.

County leaders and stakeholders consistently acknowledge the impact of quality early development and learning experiences on children’s education and life outcomes *and* the future success of the county. Existing investments in school readiness supports and services are showing results, including less need for special education and English language learner services once children enter school. Fairfax County stakeholders have adopted a common school readiness definition and are using multiple approaches to measure school readiness. However, results from Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) kindergarten screenings—one measure in use—suggest a need for more and/or better school readiness supports for some children.

Shifting demographics, an intentional focus on achieving equity, and growing awareness of the importance of all children succeeding in school from the start have prompted stakeholders to focus on providing equitable and diverse school readiness supports.

A growing proportion of people from varied cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds now call Fairfax County home – a trend that is expected to continue over time.⁵ County leaders are embracing increasing diversity, while acknowledging a need to address rising inequities related to race, culture, income levels, poverty, and employment rates. This includes providing high-quality, subsidized school readiness supports—early childhood learning and development opportunities, early developmental screenings, mental health services, and physical health services, among others—to children and families who need them most. Because each family has different priorities, preferences, and needs, there is demand for a variety of early development and learning experiences across the county.

Gaps in information about children and families makes coordinating the demand and supply for school readiness opportunities and services challenging.

The county can estimate the supply of regulated care, but it is difficult to disaggregate the data by age, race and economic status of children served. County data show a growing demand for subsidized early development and learning opportunities. Stakeholders reported a shortage of services for children with special needs and infant and early childhood mental health providers and a need to ensure equitable access to existing services. However, determining the demand for various types of programs and services is challenging, as is assessing whether and how they are contributing to school readiness. Additionally,

⁵ PolicyLink and USC Program for Environmental & Regional Equity. June, 2015. *Equitable Growth Profile of Fairfax County*.

information about where many babies and toddlers spend their day and what experiences they are having during this critical developmental period is not readily available.

While many initiatives and organizations are working to support quality in early childhood programs and the continued professional growth of early childhood educators and professionals, opportunities exist for greater coordination and increased equity across and among these efforts.

Research shows that for early childhood developmental experiences to be impactful, they must be of high quality.⁶ Because the quality of early learning and developmental experiences is highly dependent upon the talents and expertise of educators and professionals, Fairfax County's Office for Children, Fairfax County Public Schools and their partners are focused on working to ensure a highly skilled early childhood and school age education workforce so that children reach their full potential and that families are supported. Center-based and family child care programs receive various quality-related supports, including technical assistance from early childhood specialists, access to various professional learning opportunities, and the option to participate in quality or accreditation programs. Despite these initiatives, school readiness stakeholders describe a range of quality within early childhood programs. Formal education and professional credentialing opportunities are also available to early childhood educators, but barriers to participation exist for many. Addressing pay equity and ensuring a living wage for early childhood educators and professionals is also a challenge. Stakeholders reported significant discrepancies in pay across programs and that many early childhood professionals do not earn a living wage.

A strong foundation and structure has been developed to support a cohesive system of school readiness supports, although stakeholders acknowledge that more work is needed to ensure that the system is equitable, data driven, and directly linked to family needs.

The Successful Children and Youth Policy Team (SCYPT), established in 2013, provides a formal structure for coordinating local policies that affect young children in Fairfax County. SCYPT is comprised of representatives from Fairfax County Government, Fairfax County Public Schools, and community-based providers and stakeholders. The team serves as a lever for a broader, community-wide collective impact approach to ensuring the success and well-being of children and youth in Fairfax County. While SCYPT works to coordinate local policies, misalignment among local, state, and federal policies limits families' access to school readiness supports. The county government and its partners are coordinating efforts to help families to access programs and services for which they are eligible, often successfully braiding diverse funding streams to increase access to school readiness programs and services. Partners are also working together to ensure that children transition smoothly to kindergarten and to support children with disabilities, developmental delays, health, and/or mental health challenges, although more coordination is needed in these areas. Opportunities also exist to increase coordination within the early childhood community,

⁶ Heckman, J., et al. *Early Childhood Education*. University of Chicago: 2015 and Garcia, J.L., Heckman, J., "The Life Cycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program."

whose leaders reported few formal or ongoing opportunities for connections among all early childhood programs and suggested that neighborhood-based strategies hold promise for better coordination among various school readiness stakeholders.

While county partners collect significant amounts of data related to school readiness supports, several data gaps exist. Partners point to a need to use collective, disaggregated, and population-level data to inform and advance their work.

Broad communication about school readiness opportunities and their importance is an area of ongoing need. Additionally, there is a pressing need to engage families, businesses, and other community and civic partners in promoting school readiness.

The Fairfax County Equitable School Readiness Plan seeks to build on these strengths and address areas of identified need.