CHILDREN & YOUTH REPORT CARD REVIEW

BY ALEXANDRIA CITY HIGH SCHOOL

Chase McKnight and Viggo Viira

TOPIC

Early Childhood Education in Alexandria

TOPIC DESCRIPTION

Focuses on increasing participation in high-quality early care and education (ECE) to give every child a strong start in life and school.

RESULT

We intend to see every child in Alexandria with a strong start in life and education. Meaning all children regardless of race, background, or income.

- 78% OF KINDERGARTNERS MET SCHOOL READINESS BENCHMARKS
- 100% OF CYCP STRATEGIES ARE IN PROGRESS OR FULLY IMPLEMENTED
- 99% OF PARTNER PROGRAMS MET OR EXCEEDED EXPECTATIONS UNDER VIRGINIA'S VQB5 SYSTEM
- ECE FUNDING INCREASED BY 21%
- 89% OF PROGRAM MEMBERS REPORT POSITIVE IMPACTS FROM COLLABORATION

CYCP GOAL AND STRATEGIC AREA

Goal: All children, youth, and families are physically safe and healthy

Strategic Area: Early Care and Education Access, Quality, System Alignment, and Family Connections

SIGNIFICANCE

A strong start in early childhood is one of the most powerful predictors of lifelong success. The first five years of a child's life are a period of rapid brain development, during which the foundation for cognitive, emotional, and social skills is built. Children who attend high-quality early care and education (ECE) programs are more likely to:

- Enter kindergarten ready to learn
- Achieve higher academic performance
- Graduate from high school
- Experience improved physical and mental health
- Have higher lifetime earnings

On the other hand, children who enter school behind are more likely to stay behind. Gaps in school readiness at age five often grow over time, leading to disparities in achievement that persist into adulthood. This makes early childhood education not only a matter of academic preparation, but also one of equity and long-term economic opportunity.

For communities, investing in early childhood leads to broad benefits. According to economists, every dollar spent on high-quality ECE yields an estimated return of $7 to $13 through reduced spending on remediation, social services, and increased productivity and tax contributions.

Furthermore, improving access to care helps working families participate in the labor force. When families can find affordable, quality childcare, parents—especially mothers—are more likely to work, support their families, and contribute to the local economy.

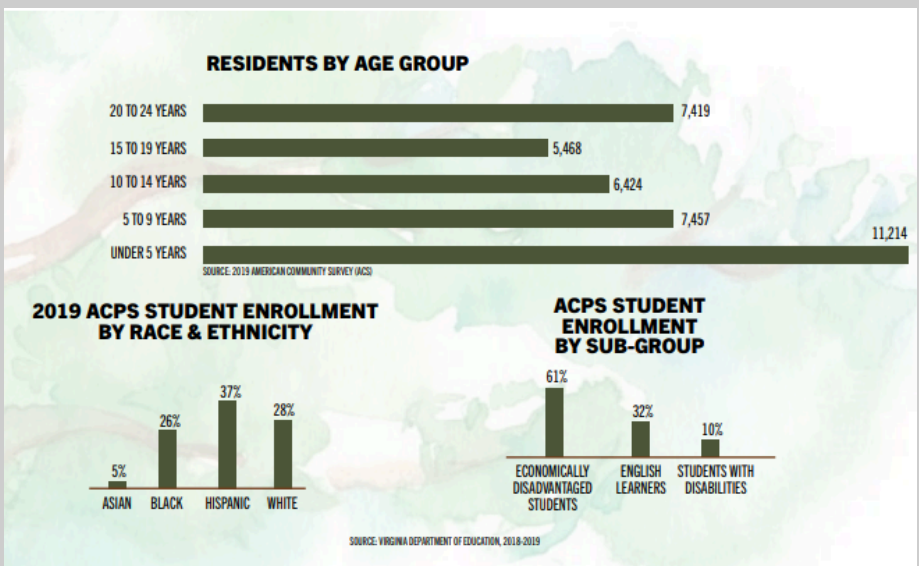
Finally, supporting children and families from birth through age five strengthens the social fabric of the city, improves public health, and reduces the need for later interventions.

HOW ARE WE DOING?

To understand how Alexandria is doing in early childhood education, we need to look at key indicators of access, quality, and family satisfaction. This baseline helps determine where progress has been made and where challenges remain.

Current Status (April 2021–October 2023):

- Kindergarten Readiness:
- 78% of Alexandria's kindergartners met Virginia's school readiness benchmarks in Fall 2022.
- Source: Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program (VKRP)
- Access to Child Care:
- 67% of surveyed families report having child care during the hours they need.
- However, only 63% of families say it is easy to find care.
- Source: City of Alexandria Family Survey, 2023
- Family Experience:
  - 34% of families reported that their child's care provider always respects their family's culture and background.
  - 89% of KFY partners say their collaborative efforts improve services for children and families.
- Funding Growth:
- The City of Alexandria increased early childhood funding by 21% over two years, from FY2021 to FY2023.
- Source: City of Alexandria Budget Office, 2023
- Provider Quality:
- 99% of participating programs met or exceeded expectations under Virginia's VQB5 quality rating system.
- Source: Virginia Department of Education – VQB5 Data



IMPLEMENTATION

The City of Alexandria and Kids' First Years (KFY) are actively pursuing a coordinated, multi-pronged approach to improving early childhood care and education. These strategies aim to increase access, enhance quality, engage families, and align systems for long-term sustainability and equity. The following are the main areas of implementation, with significant progress noted from April 2021 to October 2023:

- **1. Coordinated Access and Funding**
  - **Unified Enrollment System: Alexandria is working to create a centralized application process for publicly funded preschool programs like Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), Head Start, and ALX Preschool.**
  - **Increased Financial Investment: The city increased its early childhood budget by 21% over two years, ensuring stable funding for programs and providers.**
  - **Support for Providers: Grants and technical assistance help child care providers meet licensing and quality standards.**
- **2. Family Engagement and Empowerment**
  - **Connect & Play Events: Regular community events offer learning-rich environments for children and direct resource access for parents.**
  - **Community Baby Showers: These events provide new and expectant families with early education information, health screenings, and support.**
  - **Parent Communication Toolkit: Offers providers a resource to engage families with diverse backgrounds in culturally respectful ways.**
- **3. Elevating Early Childhood Workforce Quality**
  - **Professional Learning Opportunities: Over 54 trainings have been delivered to ECE professionals, including those focused on trauma-informed care, cultural competency, and classroom engagement.**
  - **CLASS Observations: 187 programs completed at least two Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) observations, helping educators reflect on and improve their interactions with children.**
  - **Workforce Recognition and Retention: Efforts are underway to acknowledge and retain early educators through stipends, mentorship, and professional development.**
- **4. System Alignment, Planning, and Data Use**
  - **Cross-Agency Collaboration: Through MOUs and formal partnerships (21 signed), agencies now share goals, data, and strategies.**
  - **Use of Shared Data Dashboards: These tools help track program participation, outcomes, and equity gaps.**
  - **Early Childhood Workgroups: Specialized workgroups focus on access, quality, communication, and system infrastructure.**
- **5. Equity-Focused Strategies**
  - **Language Access and Cultural Inclusion: Resources and services are increasingly provided in multiple languages, and cultural sensitivity training is being embedded into staff development.**
  - **Focus on Underrepresented Families: Implementation efforts actively include families with limited English proficiency, low income, or nontraditional work schedules.**
- **6. Public Preschool Expansion**
  - **ALX Preschool: A city-funded preschool program launched to offer more full-day, affordable options to families who don't qualify for federal programs but still struggle to afford private care.6**
  - **Space Audit Initiative: The city is conducting a comprehensive audit of current preschool space availability to plan for future expansion.**

PARTNERSHIPS

Alexandria City Public Schools, George Mason University, Inova, Hopkins House, NVCC, and more.

PERFORMANCE EFFORT

- 54 educator trainings
- 187 programs with two completed CLASS observations
- 21 MOUs signed with partners
- 207 children served
- 100% of strategic initiatives in progress or implemented

PERFORMANCE EFFECT

- 89% of KFY members report benefits from collaboration
- 63% of families say it's easy to find care
- 34% report their care provider respects cultural background
- High levels of trust and goal alignment among partners

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve early childhood outcomes in Washington, DC, we recommend the following policies. These actions directly support CYCP goals of advancing racial equity, supporting families, and ensuring all children are healthy and prepared for school.

1. Increase Public Investment in Early Care and Education
- **What: Expand funding for child care subsidies, provider compensation, and facilities.**
- **Why: High-quality programs are unaffordable for most families, and providers struggle to survive financially.**
- **How: Raise revenue through progressive tax measures or redirect funds from underutilized programs.**

2. Create a Coordinated Enrollment System
- **What: Implement a universal, citywide application system for all early learning programs.**
- **Why: Families currently face a confusing, fragmented process to access care.**
- **How: Use MySchoolDC as a model and expand it to include child care and Pre-K programs across public and private settings.**

3. Raise Compensation for Early Educators
- **What: Ensure parity between early educators and K-12 teachers.**
- **Why: Low wages drive turnover and reduce the quality of care.**
- **How: Continue the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund and make it permanent.**

4. Prioritize Equity in Access and Outcomes
- **What: Use data to target investment in historically underserved neighborhoods.**
- **Why: Racial and economic disparities persist in access to high-quality care.**
- **How: Prioritize funding for programs serving Black, Latinx, immigrant, and low-income families.**

5. Expand Infant and Toddler Care Spaces
- **What: Invest in new facilities or retrofit existing public buildings.**
- **Why: DC has a severe shortage of licensed care for infants and toddlers.**
- **How: Offer capital grants and technical assistance to providers expanding capacity.**

6. Strengthen Family Engagement
- **What: Support programs that involve parents in decision-making and education.**
- **Why: Family partnership is key to child development and long-term outcomes.**
- **How: Offer training and resources to help programs build authentic engagement strategies.**

7. Develop a Governance and Accountability Structure
- **What: Establish a unified agency or task force to oversee early childhood programs.**
- **Why: Coordination between DCPS, OSSE, and community-based providers is inconsistent.**
- **How: Create a formal cross-agency governance model with clear oversight authority.**

8. Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Training
- **What: Ensure all programs use materials and strategies that reflect DC's diverse communities.**
- **Why: Children thrive when their cultures and languages are respected and celebrated.**
- **How: Provide ongoing professional development and update licensing requirements.**

ONLINE

1. DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) – Early Learning
Link: 12th- Share & explain at least two online resources to learn more about this topic
What it offers:
This site is the official source for DC's early childhood policies, data reports, licensing rules, and funding opportunities. It includes:
- Child care subsidy details
- Pre-K enrollment info
- Quality rating data
- Educator pay equity program updates

Why it matters:
OSSE drives DC's early education strategy. Understanding their reports and initiatives helps citizens, educators, and families hold the system accountable and track progress over time.

2. Under 3 DC
Link: 12th- Share & explain at least two online resources to learn more about this topic
What it offers:
A coalition of parents, educators, and advocates focused on improving outcomes for children under age 3 in DC. The site features:
- Policy campaigns
- Budget breakdowns
- Community stories
- Advocacy toolkits

Why it matters:
This grassroots-led resource highlights equity gaps and pushes for real-time solutions, such as more funding, better workforce pay, and family voice in policymaking.

IN PERSON

Family support services offered at:

- 4850 Mark Center Drive, Alexandria, VA
- Call 703-746-KIDS for local assistance and screenings

CITATIONS

District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education. (n.d.). Early learning. https://osse.dc.gov/service/early-learning

Under 3 DC. (n.d.). Under 3 DC: Ensuring every child gets a strong start. https://www.under3dc.org

Office of the State Superintendent of Education. (2023). State of early care and education in the District of Columbia. https://osse.dc.gov

DC Early Childhood Policy Council. (2023). CYCP early childhood report card. https://cycpdc.org

Thrive by Five DC. (n.d.). Resources and events. https://thrivebyfive.dc.gov