



Virginia Statistics:

State Population	8,260,405
<i>(2013 estimate)</i>	
0-5 population	6.2%
<i>(2012 estimate)</i>	
Poverty level	11.1%
<i>(2012 estimate)</i>	
# of local collaboratives	25
State/Local Collaborative	
Total Funding:	\$3 million +
<i>(FY 2014)</i>	

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Virginia's Smart Beginnings Initiative

At the state level, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) leads Virginia's Smart Beginnings Initiative. VECF is a 501(c)(3) organization, created in 2005, that has received an annual appropriation from the state legislature since 2006 to support its local early childhood systems building efforts. The mission of VECF is to support school readiness through development of local early childhood initiatives and to serve as a nonpartisan steward of capacity building aimed at advancing school readiness in Virginia. VECF also serves as a co-lead for the Virginia Early Childhood Advisory Council and partners with the Virginia Department of Social Services in the administration of and strategic planning for the state's quality rating and improvement system.

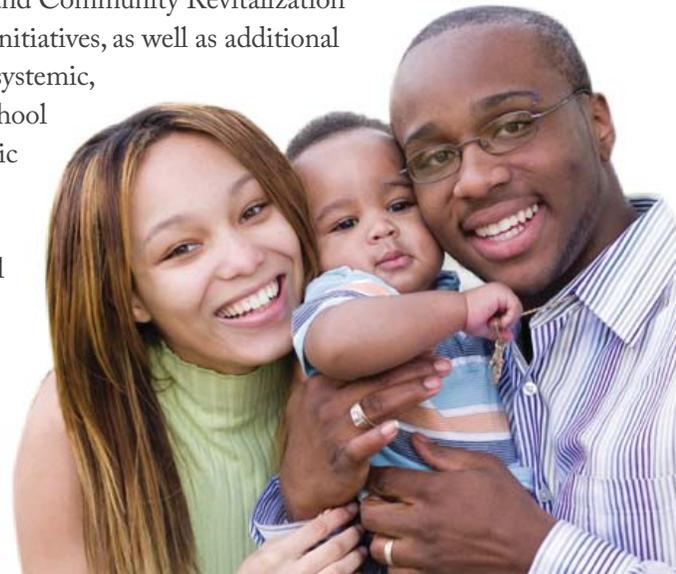
There are currently 25 local/regional initiatives that VECF supports as part of its work on behalf of Smart Beginnings.

State-Level Governance

VECF is a 501(c)(3) organization and has a board of directors that leads the organization. The board appoints its own membership, and includes up to 5 ex officio seats for senior representatives of the gubernatorial administration, including Secretaries of Education, Health & Human Resources, and Commerce and Trade..

State-Level Funding

Since FY07, VECF has received a state appropriation of approximately \$1.5 million from the legislature. In addition, VECF has received grants from the Tobacco Indemnification and Community Revitalization Commission to support local initiatives, as well as additional federal funding to support its systemic, statewide efforts to advance school readiness. Leveraging the public dollars, VECF raises private (foundation, corporate and individual donations) and local funds to match the public dollars at least 4:1 to support their state and local efforts.





State-Level Staffing

VECF has a staff of nine; it also uses a number of paid consultants. The staff consists of:

- President;
- Director of Strategy, who focuses on partnerships, resource development, and advocacy;
- Director of Community Investment, who serves as a liaison between the state and locals;
- External Relations Manager, who implements communications strategies;
- Three staff members who do work related to Virginia's QRIS and co-administer the program in partnership with the Department of Social Services;
- Executive Administrator; and
- Southwest Virginia Regional Coordinator.
(This is a temporary position that will soon transition to the local level.)

Fiscal management, research/evaluation, and other special expertise needs are contracted out to private consultants.

Advocacy

Currently, at the state level, VECF advocacy efforts are targeted to key decision makers and appropriators in the state legislature. Because Smart Beginnings grants to local initiatives are primarily funded through a state appropriation, advocacy strategies focus on year-round, highly-individualized meetings with legislators. By

tailoring the message and conversations to individual legislators, not only do Smart Beginnings leaders establish a long-term relationship, but they are also able to address and understand specific legislative concerns and questions. They approach advocacy one legislator at a time, building their understanding and confidence in the Smart Beginnings work. The aim is also to ensure that each legislator hears about the statewide perspective and also learns about the local early childhood needs and efforts. To that end, both VECF board members and regional leaders are an essential component of the advocacy process. They work to engage business, health, higher education and faith community leaders in legislative visits. While advocacy efforts primarily focus on the Smart Beginnings appropriation, advocacy leaders emphasize and educate about the early childhood system as a whole and often address specific programs, such as home visiting and early intervention.

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In addition to legislative advocacy, VECF uses communications strategies to make sure that reports, progress and human interest success stories are shared with policy makers through targeted media outlets, using strategic messengers such as statewide business leaders.

Local Smart Beginnings (SB) partners are strategically involved in VECF's advocacy efforts. VECF identifies priority legislators and works closely with SB partners to identify local issues, stories and effective messengers. Smart Beginnings partners play a critical role in informing the discussion. VECF encourages partners to think and act strategically regarding advocacy efforts. VECF emphasizes and models the importance of a balanced, non-partisan approach to advocacy and encourages SB partners to participate in activities where they are likely to engage with policy makers, such as local Chambers of Commerce, Workforce Investment Boards, local civic groups and other community organizations. VECF also employs a lobbyist and other political strategists to assist with advocacy efforts during the legislative session.

Local Smart Beginnings Initiative Overview:

The first four local initiatives in Virginia were funded in 2005 through competitive grants from the Virginia Department of Social Services. A year later, VECF was founded and took responsibility for making grants to the local initiatives, which eventually expanded to 29 (Currently there are 25 local or regional initiatives, as some have merged and others are in transition.) Each initiative was funded through a competitive Request for Proposal (RFP) process. Today, these local or regional initiatives vary in composition from one jurisdiction to as many as 10 (including a mix of cities and counties). Some cover very broad geographical areas and others cover a small area. In the southwest region, state leaders are working with communities to develop a large regional initiative. Originally, this region developed local initiatives in clusters of two or three jurisdictions, creating entities that encompassed very rural areas with limited population and high rates of poverty. Because of the dynamics and characteristics of the region, they struggled to survive on their own and are now working to form a regional system. The impetus to regionalize arose organically in the southwest and VECF supported the process, hiring a regional coordinator who is housed in the southwest region. VECF leaders predict that other counties and cities will cluster in similar regional efforts in the future for sustainability, and stand ready to support the process.

Most local or regional initiatives focus on children from birth to age five. A few have expanded their focus to cover the prenatal period and/or to extend through third grade. In most instances, even if their stated mission focuses on children 0-5, they are working strategically with the local schools and see the need for partnerships that extend to third grade.

The grant funding provided to the local and regional initiatives by VECF from its state legislative appropriation and Tobacco Commission funds is to support the development of local early childhood systems and is not allocated to direct services. In the early days of the Smart Beginnings initiative, grant funds could be used to support program strategies and the initial allocations were much larger, some as much as \$500,000 for a two-year term. The influx of funds tempted some initiatives to launch programs. Over time, it became apparent that

the cost of program services was difficult to sustain, and that a focus on programs was distracting leaders from the core systems development that is the primary objective of Smart Beginnings. The focus has shifted as the initiative has evolved. There is now a greater emphasis on providing the infrastructure to support the collaborative process and urging communities to support a strategic approach to maximizing available resources, as well as raising and leveraging additional funds for specific strategies.

Approximately 90% of the state's population is covered by a local or regional Smart Beginnings initiative.

Local-Level Staffing

Each local or regional initiative has a coordinator (either part-or full-time) who is funded through the state grants. Under the original funding, each regional collaborative was required to hire a full-time coordinator. VECF leaders soon realized that this requirement was not accomplishing the goal of assuring capable and adequate local coordination and was instead burdening communities who could not afford to hire a highly qualified person on a full-time basis. A few initiatives have more than one staff member and, often, additional personnel related to the state's QRIS. Volunteers may lead such work as data collection, organizing events, etc. Some of the fiscal agents also contribute staff, particularly to the entities that are housed under a local United Way. One example is Smart Beginnings Greater Richmond. This is a regional initiative embedded in the United Way. It has a full-time coordinator and receives support from the United Way Director of Community Impact. The United Way marketing staffer is also actively involved in the Smart Beginnings Greater Richmond efforts.

All staff members are employed by the United Way, which acts as fiscal agent.

Local Collaborative Funding

Three local initiatives were funded beginning in 2005 through the Virginia Department of Social Services. When VECF was established and received a state appropriation,



additional local initiatives were funded under a competitive Request for Proposal process. Eventually, 29 local or regional initiatives were funded. As initiatives have merged and others moved through transitions, there are currently 25 local or regional initiatives. Twenty four initiatives receive grant funds ranging within a grant term from as little as \$5,000 to as much as \$117,000 from public funds. One additional local initiative is funded by a private grant. The funding level is determined by the initiative's phase of development and cost of operations and is not based on how large a region or population it encompasses. Through 2013, funding was based on an RFP process. Currently, the funding process is under revision. State leaders are considering an annual funding range of \$60,000 - \$70,000 for developing local initiatives.

Under the current funding structure, Smart Beginnings initiatives fall into the following categories:

- **Planning Grants:** In this initial funding cycle, Smart Beginnings initiatives are established. Leadership councils are formed, staff is hired and community needs assessments are conducted.
- **Getting Ready Grants:** An additional two years of support is awarded for program implementation, community engagement and strengthening infrastructure.
- **Partnership Grants:** Further funding for a term of two years is awarded to initiatives that have successfully built an infrastructure of comprehensive systems and are equipped to lead a region's early childhood development efforts.
- **Sustaining Grants:** Initiatives are then provided two years of support to maintain their school readiness efforts while building local resources for long term sustainability.
- **Sustaining Partners:** After completing all phases of the grant cycle, these initiatives are leading partners of early childhood development within their respective communities. Sustaining Partners receive a stipend of \$5,000 to report outcome data, as well as access to all technical assistance and peer learning opportunities.
- **Smart Beginnings Communities:** These initiatives are working to advance school readiness efforts in their regions, but are not currently operating with VECF funding.

In addition to the state legislative funds that are channeled through VECF to local initiatives, additional funds are

raised and/or leveraged from other sources to support local/regional efforts. IN FY2013, \$5.8 million in private, local, and federal funds were raised and leveraged by VECF and local Smart Beginnings initiatives.

Technical Assistance and Support to Regional Initiatives

Every local initiative, regardless of funding level, can take advantage of all technical assistance and support opportunities offered by VECF. Initiatives at the "sustaining partner" level are not required to participate but often see the value of being part of the statewide network.

In recent years, VECF has shifted its approach to supporting the local initiatives and has gone from general technical assistance to focusing on a more targeted systems development approach. It now uses content area experts to support efforts at the local and regional level. Under this new approach, local initiatives are being asked to build capacity to impact policies that inhibit access to services and content experts are available to assist them in this effort. Partnerships are being facilitated between state and local leaders to work on how to blend/braid funding, eliminate barriers to services, increase quality of programs, etc. VECF regularly holds webinars that bring together state and local leaders for discussion. With this change in approach, state leaders also found that local partners were struggling to understand what local systems development entailed. In response, they implemented a statewide leadership development course that focuses on developing the capacity of local leaders to build comprehensive local systems. It's a five-session program and VECF funds scholarships for two members from each local/regional initiative. The Smart Beginnings Leader Institute, like the other technical assistance strategies, has moved away from a singular focus on the process of infrastructure development and monitoring grants to a greater priority on building local early childhood systems.

As part of the technical assistance and network building process, VECF holds a statewide training



meeting each year among all of the local/regional initiatives, as well as quarterly regional meetings among the local coordinators to support peer-to-peer learning and cross-initiative collaboration. Local coordinators come together to share what they are doing and build relationships.

VECF also holds webinars to support the local systems building efforts. These are held on a “responsive” basis: VECF hears from local partners and identifies trends across the regions. It also regularly connects local coordinators with their peers or state level leaders doing similar work to share experiences and assist with problem-solving.

The technical assistance system to support the local initiatives has evolved since VECF was first created. The technical assistance system has continued to change and respond to the different phases of development of the local initiatives and to create new approaches in response to those changes. The local Smart Beginnings initiatives are now moving into a new phase of development that particularly emphasizes local systems building efforts and VECF’s technical assistance will again evolve to better support these efforts.

” As part of the technical assistance and network building process, VECF holds a statewide training meeting each year among all of the local/regional initiatives.

Local Initiative “Snapshot” - Smart Beginnings Greater Roanoke (SBGR):

The Greater Roanoke Smart Beginnings Initiative was launched in 2007. It encompasses the “medium-sized” city of Roanoke and the surrounding county as well as more rural/high poverty areas outside of the Roanoke city/county area. SBGR has 2.5 employees, including a full time coordinator, someone who works full-time on QRIS-related activities for the local area and a part-time administrator. SBGR also contracts with private consultants to assist with school readiness efforts, such as QRIS raters and mentors and facilitators for community workshops.

In 2012-2013, SBGR’s annual budget was \$208,000. This year (2013-2014) SBGR’s budget is \$250,000. SBGR receives funding from a variety of public-private investments. The largest funder is the United Way Roanoke Valley, which supports SBGR through community impact funds and serves as the organization’s fiscal agent.

SBGR has a Steering Committee that meets quarterly and serves in an advisory capacity. The steering committee is comprised of top level business and community leaders, as well as school, child care, human service and community college leaders who advise SBGR staff on the overall big picture. There is also an Operations Committee that meets monthly and looks at the budget and programs and progress towards goals on a more detailed basis. Operations Committee members are also represented on the steering committee. Neither of these committees serves as an actual board but they serve a purpose similar

to a board. They also have action teams that support components of the work. Generally, action teams focus on specific program issue areas, as well as marketing and public engagement. SBGR has found this structure to be highly effective in organizing the work by topic area in order to get broad input and involvement from a range of volunteers.

In 2007, SBGR received a two-year Partnership Grant of \$400,000 from VECF to build a local early childhood initiative. Funding was used to support multiple services focused on improving school readiness. The community struggled with development of a systems approach to school readiness and made little progress toward the infrastructure or collaborative partnerships needed to assure a sustainable initiative. At the end of the two-year grant, the initiative was struggling and declined the opportunity to apply for a second VECF grant.

VECF maintained contact and provided technical assistance to support SBGR’s development. The initiative moved through a period of transition with changes in coordination and the lead agency. They regrouped to apply for VECF funding in the summer of 2010 and received a Sustaining Grant of \$100,000 from VECF in July 2010.

In the fall of 2012, SBGR became a Sustaining Partner of VECF and now annually receives a grant of \$5,000, as well as ongoing technical assistance from VECF staff and the opportunity to participate in all VECF activities. (This grant process is now being restructured by VECF to allow a longer period of transition under the initial grant to communities.) SBGR is responsible for raising all other funding to support its work although occasionally other funding opportunities do come

through the state to the local initiatives, including funding from the Virginia Department of Social Services for funding to support QRIS-related activities and recent funding partnerships through VECF with Norfolk-Southern and MeadWestvaco to support state and local Smart Beginnings efforts.

In retrospect, in the early days, SBGR may not have used its funds most effectively. It has learned from those early experiences and restructured its approach. For example, it often funded programs that were not sustainable and only had limited impact. With limited funding, it now has to think about how to use its funds in a way that will have broader and longer term impact. With guidance from VECF's [Evidence Based Directory](#), it now takes a more systemic approach. Now committee members emphasize that their goal is not necessarily to do the work but to guide the conversations and bring research to the table on evidence-based strategies along with local data to inform strategic direction.

The SBGR coordinator receives support from local coalition leaders, VECF staff and other SB coordinators from around the state. For example, the SBGR coordinator and the Smart Beginnings New River Valley (NRV) coordinator work together on joint public engagement and marketing strategies. VECF also helps facilitate collaboration between SB coordinators via group phone calls, informational webinars and occasional in-person regional and state meetings. When needed, the SBGR coordinator has also provided guidance and support to newer coalition leaders.

When asked about the pros and cons of and lessons learned about the structure they have developed, the SBGR Coordinator noted the following:

- **Find ways to expand your staffing infrastructure.** This is no one else's paid job beyond the limited full-time staff of SBGR. That can impact the pace of progress. However, when volunteer coalition members feel like their involvement is helpful to their job, they become more engaged and actually inspire others to become involved as well.
- **Having an organization to convene conversations between community partners, like SBGR, is critical for local systems building work.** Otherwise, these cross-group conversations happen rarely or are not sustained over time.



- **It helps to have multiple levels of representation across various governing committees so that there are multiple levels of understanding and leadership.** For example, SBGR coalition members range from people on the ground who work directly with young children and families to the president of the community college, school superintendents and business representatives.
- **Measuring outcomes can be challenging but it ensures accountability. Find ways to measure progress and track local improvement/progress towards outcomes.** In Virginia, Kindergarten PALS early literacy screening results are used to measure school readiness. SBGR also provides monthly and quarterly reports on local progress related to school readiness outcomes. For example, SBGR tracks four year olds at local QRIS programs using the pre-K version of PALS. It also measures quality improvement progress at local QRIS programs through pre- and post-quality assessment ratings and gets feedback on SBGR's efforts from surveying program directors.
- **Be thoughtful and intentional about the focus of systems building.** In the beginning, it can be tempting to try to do "everything" and please "everyone." Spend the time to develop relationships with local partners, and involve everyone in developing a clear strategic plan. Revisit the plan on a regular basis, with all involved.
- **Think strategically in advance about whether funding opportunities and activities are sustainable.** Put more focus on those efforts that are proven to be successful AND can be sustained.
- **Be a continuous learner.** Stay informed about and connected to what is happening at the local, regional and state levels across the county to improve school readiness.

Pros and Cons of Virginia's State/Local Model

Pros

- **Diverse Leadership:** This model has created and strengthened diverse leadership across the state at the state and local level in supporting local collaboration and the creation of early childhood systems.
- **Public/Private Partnership:** Through this model, Virginia now has an amazing public/private partnership at the state and local levels that would not otherwise have been possible.
- **Community Change:** Long-term community level change has only been possible across the state as a result of the development of the local infrastructure through Smart Beginnings.

Cons

- **Competition for resources/turf issues across communities:** As initiatives get stronger and begin to compete for resources, tension can be created as multiple localities go after limited resources. It is a challenge to create a system that supports greater collaboration and limited competition. Without increased funding, unfortunately, this may be inevitable.
- **Accountability Focus:** It is easy to get caught up in the monitoring process and making sure you are being accountable for every public dollar spent. While that is certainly important, the state may find that more time and resources are being spent on accountability and less on collaboration and innovation. While every dollar may be accounted for, what creativity is lost in the process? How can greater flexibility be built into the accountability process?
- **School Readiness Measures:** With limited funding and varied capacity across the state, effectively measuring the impact of local level systems building is complex. Ensuring the right measuring stick is challenging, and takes a long time to address.

” Spend the time to develop relationships with local partners, and involve everyone in developing a clear strategic plan. Revisit the plan on a regular basis, with all involved.

Performance Measurement

VECF is considering the best strategy for measuring performance at the local level. While it has done evaluations of the work in the past, the goal now is to move towards supporting a methodology for local initiatives that evaluates how it is doing with its systems functions.

To that end, they have established a new Advisors Council composed of experts who are helping state leaders tackle this question. They have developed a refined theory of change, heeding the Advisors' counsel to resist moving toward an evaluation paradigm that requires causal correlation to child outcomes and that doesn't appropriately reflect the value of change in behavior/action in Smart Beginnings communities. They are also considering the concept of developmental evaluation as a potential construct.

Major Accomplishments

- **Statewide Coverage:** Virginia has made significant progress in a relatively short period of time and with limited resources. Local Smart Beginnings collaboratives now encompass 90% of the state and they have been particularly successful in building greater capacity and infrastructure in rural, high poverty areas of the state.
- **Business Engagement:** Business engagement has been an essential element of the success in Virginia. VECF and the Smart Beginnings initiatives would never have been created without strong business support and advocacy. This has been critical to the sustainability of Smart Beginnings over the past decade. The legislature regularly hears from business advocates about the important work underway through Smart Beginnings and VECF. Business leaders contribute both time and resources to create a true public/private partnership.
- **Data-Driven Planning:** Through technical assistance at the state level, communities use data to guide their strategic planning efforts. Decisions are no longer made on a reactive basis at the local level but are based on data-driven planning and decision-making.
- **Evidence-Based Decision-Making:** VECF's Evidence-Based Directory is an important tool that guides local decision-making and use of program resources.



- **Strong State/Local Relationships:** The relationship between VECF and its regional partners is a strong one based upon mutual respect and support of each other's work.

Key Components to Success at the State Level

- Articulate a shared mission and vision.
- Ensure leadership commitment to a diverse public/private partnership.
- Invest in skills and capacity of local coordination - Local coordination makes or breaks an initiative. If you have a combination of strong committed influential leaders, diverse partnerships and skilled facilitation, success is possible even during tough economic times and with limited resources.
- Establish local initiatives as neutral conveners in communities. They should be seen as bringing everyone to the table for strategic discussions rather than having their own agenda.

Key Components to Success at the Local Level

- Strong, diverse and consistent leadership is essential and that leadership must be broadened beyond the local coordinator. There have been SB initiatives that were moving in the right direction and then struggled when the coordinator left. Create a systems approach to leadership so that everyone is taking responsibility for the work and the results.
- A diverse group of people in the initiative is important. If you only involve early childhood leaders, the impact will be limited. Make sure business is at the table and

also include participants such as pediatricians and others with different perspectives.

- It's important to have the state and local level connections. When the state gives guidance on something like developmental screening and does the research and gives input on the type of data that would be helpful to collect, that is very productive. Thirty different initiatives don't need to be doing that work. It helps to have the state providing resources and support on key components of the work.
- State level coordination of marketing of Smart Beginnings is a key support to local initiatives. If the state creates a marketing campaign that the locals can then tweak and use for their own purposes, that is a better use of resources than having each local create these materials on its own. Coordinated statewide fundraising is another example where state involvement is helpful.
- Technical assistance and training by the state to the local initiatives is essential.

Lessons Learned

- It takes time to develop the infrastructure and the partnerships that are needed to sustain a comprehensive system of systems.
- The rate of development of local initiatives varies. No two communities develop in the same way or on the same timeline.
- Attention is needed over time to reassess and sustain the elements of the system. The work is never done; there must be support for continuous improvement and development.
- A blend of public and private leadership contributes to a big picture focus, helps get beyond turf issues, and improves resource development.
- The skills and capacities of local coordinators have a tremendous impact on the development of a local initiative.
- Strong leadership makes a huge difference in whether the system survives when challenges arise.
- When skilled coordination, strong influential leadership, and community commitment come together, success follows.
- The natural tendency is to implement programs and services that impact a small part of the population. A neutral convener offers a chance to consider a more community-wide approach to those identified needs.

- There is great value in the learning curve from the Smart Beginnings initiative over time. Continuous learning, a spirit of inquiry, and willingness to stay nimble creates a strong and resilient system that is reflective by design and has the flexibility to make necessary changes.
- After understanding your own state's context and level of development, it's helpful to look at what other states have developed. What can you do to help your partners get to where they want to go? Learning from other states and tailoring and adapting to your realities make a huge difference.
- Smart Beginnings leaders have learned over time to resist the temptation to approach the local work as a patchwork of programs, but rather adopt a systemic approach to create and sustain community level collaboration and infrastructure.

Interviews

Dora M Butler, *Director of Community Investments*
Virginia Early Childhood Foundation

Kris Meyers, *Coordinator*
Greater Roanoke Valley Smart Beginnings

Resources

- [Smart Beginnings website](#)
- [Smart Beginnings Theory of Change](#)
- [Evidence-Based Program Guide](#)
- [Smart Beginnings Investment Framework](#)
- [Smart Beginnings Strategic Plan](#)
- [Smart Beginnings Request for Proposal](#)
- [Smart Beginnings Letter of Agreement](#)
- [Smart Beginnings Grants Manual](#)
- [Building an Effective Comprehensive Early Childhood System Toolkit](#)
- [2013 Smart Beginnings Annual Report](#)

