Introducing Ready Regions

Local Smart Beginnings have brought public and private leaders together to collaborate on priorities for their youngest citizens since 2005. With steady investment from Virginia’s governors and legislature over the last 15 years, Smart Beginnings has grown from a network of 3 community coalitions working across 9 localities to 17 Smart Beginnings working across 93 of 133 localities. Building from this asset, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) will lead a transition creating a statewide network of 10 Ready Region hubs that will cover all of Virginia and commit to assertive and consistent delivery of equitable early childhood opportunities - smart beginnings - for all families with young children in the Commonwealth.

VECF’s commitment to build the network of Ready Regions for Smart Beginnings has been accelerated by several factors:

1. Events in 2020 shed light on long-standing and unacceptable racial inequities that create disparate opportunities for Black and brown children and families. Regional, on-the-ground relationship building, convening, and community-owned strategic decision making that is the foundation of Smart Beginnings’ approach is needed now more than ever.
2. The 2020 School Readiness Act established a long-needed single point of accountability for school readiness at the state level and a mandate for a unified system of quality improvement for Virginia’s early care and education system. To avoid a top-down, “one size fits all” approach and to support the evolving landscape and improvements, Ready Region hubs will serve a critical role facilitating collaborative, cross-sector public-private partnerships needed in every region to ensure families’ access to quality.
3. The health, economic, and educational crises resulting from the pandemic clarified both the essential function of child care and the critical need for stable and consistent regional leadership in Virginia.
   a. The former motivated VECF’s creation of the Back to Work Virginia Task Force, the setting of a bold goal to ensure equitable access to quality child care for all Virginia families by 2030, and the formation of the Virginia Promise Partnership to achieve the goal. Coordinated advocacy, action, and commitment in every region will ensure the “all” in access.
   b. Schools’ shift to virtual instruction resulted in the state calling upon VECF and Smart Beginnings to provide critical leadership and nimble support for building the supply of safe learning spaces for school-age children in each region, transcending district-centric focus and highlighting the reliance on and need for a “ready” statewide regional network.

As VECF has begun to engage diverse partners in discussion, recognition of the multi-faceted benefits of regional structures has quickly emerged. In addition to providing an equitable and entrepreneurial model for Virginia, partners see benefits to making a regional impact with targeted, shared strategies that address region-specific dynamics. Smart Beginnings have evolved to meet the needs of Virginia’s children and families for 15 years. This latest evolution will allow Virginia’s public-private network to continue to be responsive to those needs for the decade to come.

Evolution of Smart Beginnings as Early Childhood Systems Builders

- Creating Smart Beginnings to build local systems 2005
- Refining systems with new core principles for Smart Beginnings 2012
- Sustaining local systems through mixed delivery & PDG 2017
- Changing landscape with School Readiness Act, pandemic, & racial injustice 2020
- Reimagining systems with a regional plan & advocacy goal 2021