

Statewide Superintendents Meeting

Thank you Dr. Lane. I'd like to start by thanking you for your leadership and recognizing the nearly impossible decisions you have before you.

I'm honored to have the chance to share a bit of perspective from the early childhood care and education community and offer suggestions and opportunities for partnership as we strive to find solutions for children and families in the pandemic era.

The VA Early Childhood Foundation and our Smart Beginnings partners host teams of public and private partners across the state, often focusing on early childhood care and education by supporting communities' thriving diversity of providers of these services including child care, Head Start, VPI, and before/after school services.

These providers perform an essential dual purpose – First, custodial service for children birth to 12 when not in school so that working families have access to safe, stable arrangements for their young children while they work and secondly, so that young children have quality early learning services to support their school readiness. Think about it this way – if young children ages birth to 12 are not in your school settings, they are either at home or in an early education or before/after school program whether public or private.

This is a diverse market of providers – an extremely different system from the formalized public K-12 system in terms of financing and infrastructure. They may be in fact, largely invisible to you, and yet the two systems are intrinsically intertwined and have some important characteristics in common –

Both systems provide environments designed to promote healthy child development and learning; both partner closely with families and provide a critical support system for their well-being. Especially in this turbulent time of disruption and loss, we must leverage the strengths of both systems to find solutions for children and families.

Just as you have all experienced, the pandemic has made normal routine far from normal. Since March, early care and education providers and small businesses have had to make difficult decisions. Public school systems were mandated to close; the private child care industry was not – in fact, they are considered essential personnel and desperately needed to serve children of front line workers so that they could show up to work at hospitals, grocery stores, care facilities, and supply chain jobs.

Child care is a market-based industry, was already running on thin margins and now they needed to reduce income to meet required pandemic limits of individuals per space and increase costs required by safety and disinfection guidelines. While many early care and education providers closed due to concerns about health and finances, a significant proportion remained open to serve the children of essential personnel – under great duress and both health and financial risk. These providers – really heroic early education programs – have demonstrated that it is possible to reduce risks and ensure in-person early care and education services following health and safety guidelines.

The challenging decisions you must make about reopening schools necessarily and significantly impact children, families, the businesses and employers that drive our economy, and the entire community ecosystem. They also have important implications for the early care and education community. As an

example -- In order for parents to work (including many of your teachers and administrators – whether working onsite or virtually), they must have care/supervision for their young children, at least to age 12.

These dilemmas to both our early education and our k-12 education systems call collaboration and outside the box thinking. Need to lean-in to non-traditional partnerships.

Humbly offer 4 suggestions for communities and school leaders, as learned the hard way from the early childhood education community:

- 1) **We suggest that communities develop a task force.** to engage stakeholders (including school administrators and teachers, families/working parents, child care providers, municipal leaders, employers, and others) in collaborative processes to inform and support school division decisions for reopening so that whole communities can design workable solutions to extremely challenging circumstances and share the burden and accountability for these awesome decisions and their downstream effect.
- 2) **Communities should agree on equity principles to guide decisions** about safeguards for priority populations to ameliorate the necessary trade-offs and keep focus on the most vulnerable populations. For us, that means identifying safe learning environments for our youngest children who must be with responsible adults, children of color, those in low-income households, and children with special needs. Recognize the impact of disruption on children's social-emotional development and health – ameliorate trauma – all hands on deck. Many of these children and their families have disproportionately experienced loss and insecurity and we must do all we can to redress those disparities and make sure that they are not left further behind due to the impacts of the pandemic.
- 3) Since small numbers are safer, **communities must work together to identify creative alternatives** for spreading out density of students – requiring more viable spaces and sites, whether in school buildings, child care, municipal sites, and any available space. There will need to be agreement across agencies for reduction in regulatory burden, while still guarding personal safety, for use of alternative spaces for the foreseeable future.
- 4) **Strengthen partnerships between child care and public schools to** leverage the strengths of both systems to find solutions for children and families. **Your local early childhood education providers** have demonstrated that it's feasible (not simple, not inexpensive, but feasible) to provide these important in-person services in small groups. There is a need to ensure that these services are fully financed to operate and provide services that are essential to our children, families, communities, and economy.

We and our community partners stand ready to collaborate and assist. This kind of partnership may or may not feel uncommon to you, but these challenging times call for uncommon solutions. If you'd like to know more about or connect with your early care and education community, please contact me at info@vecf.org. Again - Thank you for your important leadership, especially during this ridiculously difficult time.