# VECF Position Statement
# Back-to-School and Child Care

As an advocate and steward for early childhood education, children and families, and early educators in Virginia, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation offers these recommendations and perspectives to school leaders for consideration during this challenging era.

Each of the 133 school divisions in Virginia has the awesome challenge of discerning and implementing a back-to-school plan; numerous tensions must be navigated and perspectives considered. Inevitably, the FY21 school year will be laden with disruption. Each student will experience risk and opportunity loss; the impact from a turbulent era on our country's children will be far-reaching, especially for our youngest learners, children with special needs, and dual-language learners.  Our responsibility is to buffer the disruption to the extent feasible and to strive for "best possible" in an environment when "best" is not practically possible.

Decisions about reopening schools have a ripple effect across the community.  To earn a living, working parents must juggle parenting responsibilities for children 0-12 with work responsibilities; they depend upon access to public school (no cost), child care (high cost), and/or extended family for safe, learning-rich environments for children while they work. School schedules have direct impact and implications for working parents' schedules and ability to work. This is disproportionately true for low income families who may have less job flexibility and for whom the alternative of child care is costly and often out of reach.

As more school divisions elect an all-virtual/online return to school this fall, to keep Virginia's economy moving, we must find creative solutions to ensure working parents can focus on job responsibilities, whether onsite or remote, by helping them access safe, consistent learning and care settings for their children 0-12.  This includes Virginia's school teachers and staff who depend on access to schooling and/or child care for their own children. Child care providers in homes (80%) and centers (40%) have adapted and continued to operate throughout the pandemic, under great health and financial risk, and have demonstrated a model for a path forward. However, they will need strategic supports, flexibilities, and funding to fill the gaps/needs resulting from school division decisions.

Problem Statement:
The pandemic-driven challenges and abrupt changes in Virginia's back-to-school plans (with many schools considering all-virtual starts to the school year) have created an urgent need for collaborative leadership to identify creative solutions to ensure:

- *Increased safe (as considered by parents) learning spaces with caring, responsible adults for young children B-12*
- *Equitable access to early care & education and support services for vulnerable families and children*
- *Workable financing strategies to ensure solutions for vulnerable families and children*
- *Partnership across K-12 schools/system and private providers of services for children 0-12*
- *Child care providers/early educators are protected, valued, and sustainably compensated*
- *Commitment to build an equitable and durable system of early care and education that will meet the needs of children and families*

Recommendations for School Division Leaders:
**Leverage a diverse task force** and recognize downstream effect from decisions. Communities must engage stakeholders (including families/working parents, child care providers, school administrators and teachers,

municipal leaders, employers, non-profits/philanthropies and others) in collaborative processes to make decisions for reopening schools so that communities can design workable solutions to extremely challenging circumstances.

**Develop equity principles to guide decisions**. To acknowledge the stark disparities that exist among children, we must keep a keen eye on decisions that exacerbate those inequities. Identifying principles and safeguards for priority populations will help ameliorate the necessary trade-offs and keep focus on the most vulnerable populations. We must acknowledge and redress the long-standing, ongoing public health crisis of structural and institutional racism.

**Strengthen partnerships between child care and public schools.** 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. We must value and leverage the strengths of both systems to find solutions for children and families while recognizing the inherent differences/disparities in financing and regulatory frameworks.

**Be realistic and adaptive**. There is no perfect "zero risk" solution, and there will be increased cost. Focus should be on creative thinking and "best possible" alternative solutions.

**Consider past, present, future**. Leaders must grapple with longstanding institutional challenges, the immediate health crisis, and keep a steady eye on the future. As balance is regained post-pandemic, we will all lose if we do not realize the opportunities for building a more equitable, aligned, durable education system starting with our youngest learners.

Health and safety risk perspectives
- Pandemic-era restrictions and commitments for reducing transmission of the virus force a drastic change in the way schools operate for the foreseeable future. The need to avoid larger groups in contained spaces for prolonged periods of time (in essence, the typical school model) forces the need for creative space alternatives.
- Smaller groups are safer for all, especially given the continuing uncertainty about how transmission occurs and implications for age groups. Child care centers and home-based providers have demonstrated that it's feasible (not simple, not inexpensive, but feasible) to provide these important services in small groups. There is a need to ensure that these providers are fully financed to operate and provide services that are essential to our children, families, communities, and economy.
- For a temporary period of time and for much of the PK-12 student body, "school" will necessarily be outside of the school building walls.
   - While the rationale for all-virtual or staggered schedules (morning/afternoon and/or days of the week variance to allow for more students to benefit from being onsite) is understandable, the impact on families, children, and school personnel is disruptive and damaging especially for vulnerable families, children and underserved communities.
   - Children up to age 12 must consistently be in environments with responsible adults present and should be prioritized for onsite services in schools or child care sites (center- or home-based).
   - While far from ideal, virtual/hybrid learning can be implemented for students ages 13 and up, freeing up physical school facilities to allow spread to safer, lower density spaces for students aged 3-12 and teachers/staff.
   - Since small numbers are safer, communities must work together to identify creative alternatives for spreading out density – 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. (It could be argued that in some communities, school buildings/sites do not meet and have not met this standard for a very long time; openness to finding "best possible" if not "best" temporary sites will make way for needed solutions.)

Equity risk perspective
- As we grapple with the pandemic crisis and resulting circumstances and decisions, we must also acknowledge and address the long-standing, ongoing public health crisis of structural and institutional racism.

- o High-quality early childhood education is a lever to improve educational and later life outcomes for children. The gaps in well-being, access, and achievement between at-risk children and their peers were already unacceptable before the pandemic and will only worsen due to spring school closures, typical summer learning loss, and life disruption. For example, pre-pandemic, only 45% of low-income children attended preschool (compared to 65% of their higher-income peers).
  - o Since many risks are associated with child poverty, this single indicator can best illustrate overall risk disparities. Census data for 2016 (American Community Survey) for the birth-five population in Virginia show that the estimated poverty rate for black children (29%) was nearly quadruple the rate for non-Hispanic white children (8%); and the rate for Hispanic children (26%) more than triple the non-Hispanic white rate. The potential impact of both circumstances – prolonged recession-induced child poverty and severe racial/ethnic poverty disparities – is grave.
  - o The risks to students of color are disproportionately higher both in terms of the virus and school conditions. Poor students and students of color are more likely to attend school in crumbling buildings with poor ventilation and overcrowded classrooms. Yet, there is risk in not returning to the school setting, since school is where many vulnerable young students access food security, health services, wifi/technological supports, and personal safety.
- Just as we prioritize younger children for onsite, adult-responsive services, students of color, those in low-income households, with special needs, and dual language learners must also be prioritized for supports and services.

Bright Ideas
- The current process of consolidating administration and financing of early childhood programs at the Virginia Department of Education provides a compelling opportunity for accountability by state government to a re-imagined system where birth-age 18 educational services are more streamlined and supportive of Virginia's working families and children.
- Governor Northam, by executive order, could direct the establishment of regional tasks forces to inform and support school representatives in decision-making around back-to-school plans.
- Especially given many divisions' indications of all-virtual starts to the school year, the demand for child care for children 0-12 may far exceed the supply. A potential solution is Staffed Family Child Care Networks – a concept to quickly shore up support for and supply of quality, safe (small-group) settings for children 0-12.
- Teachers who parent children 0-12 may need child care for their own children to enable them to return to onsite classrooms. A potential solution is Microcenters – a concept to pop up space at the school site for child care for these children.
- More than ever before, public-private partnerships for mixed delivery of preschool services in community-based settings will be needed and valued.

**References**
- New Report Says Schools Should Try To Reopen In Person For Elementary Students**,** July 2020. The National Academy of Sciences report includes an updated review of the evidence from around the world and a set of recommendations on mitigation strategies for the coronavirus in school settings.
- The Ethics of K-12 School Reopening: Identifying and Addressing the Values at Stake, Johns Hopkins Univ., June 2020. This report frames school re-opening around four broad moral values—well-being, liberty, justice, and legitimacy—and how policies under consideration can promote or undermine these moral values.