

# 2020 Annual Report

smart  
beginnings

ALEXANDRIA



Ready for School. Ready for Life.



A Proud Partner of the Virginia  
Smart Beginnings Network

---

# Smart Beginnings Alexandria and Our Annual Report

In 2014, the City Council adopted a Children and Youth Master Plan (CYMP) that addressed the needs of Alexandria's children in a more holistic manner, attempted to break down silos, and promoted children and youth success. Recognizing the challenges facing many young children in Alexandria, that plan called for a strategy to "support the development and alignment of, and access to, a high-quality early care and education system that prepares young children to enter kindergarten."

Rather than many organizations working on their own toward this goal, key system entities that surround children came together to make sure our city provides comprehensive support, care, and education for all of its young children and their families. Smart Beginnings Alexandria (SBA) serves as the coordinating body focused on building an aligned system of high-quality early care and education services.

In our work, we use evidence-based practices and data-driven decision-making to create an early care and education system that prepares all children in Alexandria to succeed in school and in life by:

- Having opportunities to achieve educational success
- Attaining the highest levels of health
- Thriving in environments that support social and emotional wellbeing
- Feeling welcomed and cared for by a nurturing and accepting community

Guided by our Common Agenda, a framework that lays out our priority focus areas, our goal is to build a system that is high-quality, culturally and financially accessible, comprehensive, and equitable, so that **all children are academically, physically, socially and emotionally ready to enter and succeed in kindergarten and beyond.**

Since its inception, SBA has promised to report out on the progress made through the initiative each December 1st. However due to the COVID-19 pandemic and limited data availability, this Annual Report will focus on our accomplishments in 2020 as a collective and will not include the outcomes and metrics we typically report. While we cannot report data in this report, we are using this time period as an opportunity to improve how and what data we are collecting. We are currently working with a data consultant to develop a data system and data sharing agreements with key partners to capture how children are being served by and benefiting from the early care and education system. At the completion of this project, we will have a new **Learning and Evaluation Guide**, a companion tool to our Common Agenda, which will detail how we will measure progress.

---

# The Official Launch of Smart Beginnings Alexandria

In 2019, the Early Care and Education Work Group, voted to become Smart Beginnings Alexandria (SBA) and join Smart Beginnings, a statewide network of local partners that work to support local communities in delivering on and ensuring conditions for a strong, healthy start for young children and their families. Much more than a name change, the move has allowed Alexandria to access additional state funding opportunities, such as the Preschool Development Grant Birth -5, and to collaborate with a statewide network of public and private leaders on shared priorities.

As part of this transition and rebranding effort, SBA officially launched in February with a new logo, website, brand messaging, social media platforms, and other collateral materials. In addition to the outward facing changes, SBA also established operational guidelines and obtained partnership commitments from all Work Group members.

In February, SBA hired its first full-time Executive Director to lead the backbone support and fulfill essential ongoing functions related to coordinating, monitoring, and sustaining both the work and the infrastructure needed to support the efforts. SBA also hired a part-time Grants and Special Project Coordinator to assist in the development, coordination, and management of all SBA grants and special initiatives. This has also led to an evolution of SBA's Steering Committee who now function more as a Board of Directors, meet frequently with the Executive Director, and operate more fully as thought partners and key drivers in developing and implementing solutions.



## A Special Thank You to Our 2020 Financial Supporters

Alexandria City Public Schools

Bruhn-Morris Family Foundation

City of Alexandria – Department of  
Community and Human Services

Ms. Erin Kriynovich

Frank and Betty Wright Foundation

Virginia Early Childhood Foundation

---

# Supporting Our Community During a Global Pandemic

When schools were dismissed on Friday, March 13th, early care and education partners acted quickly to develop plans to ensure students were able to continue learning at home. SBA worked with Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS), Alive!, The Campagna Center, The Child and Family Network Centers, Creative Play School, Hopkins House, and The Center for Alexandria's Children to send learning kits filled with manipulatives, hands-on materials, and supplies to all students. In partnership with ACPS, they also shared Learning Packets and had timeslots on ACPS-TV dedicated to early childhood students.

In response to COVID-19, Alexandria's Department of Community and Human Services formed the Emergency Child Care Collaborative with early care and education partners from across the city. SBA was asked by partners to launch a COVID-19 resource site for families and providers and managed to do so within a week. In addition, SBA was able to start posting resources regularly on social media platforms.

**A Cross Community Team was formed to collaboratively develop activities and provide materials, including tablets, for over 700 children enrolled in publicly funded programs.**

As summer approached, SBA enthusiastically engaged in the opportunity to collaborate with ACPS and The Center for Alexandria's Children to create a Summer Enrichment Packet that was published in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Amharic. The packets provided families with young children a variety of hands on activities to learn and grow together. Each topic – "Art in Color" and "Summer Discoveries" – suggested ideas for art activities, outdoor fun and science discovery, books to read together, and songs to sing.

With ACPS and many partners continuing to operate virtually at the start of SY2020-2021, a Cross Community Team was formed to collaboratively develop activities and provide materials, including tablets, for over 700 children enrolled in publicly funded programs. The partners have continued to collaborate on curriculum units of study, share resources, and coordinate outreach to children and families.



---

# Common Agenda 2020: Celebrating Our Progress, Updating Our Path

In 2015, SBA worked with the international consulting firm FSG to organize as a collective impact model and to develop the first strategy document, known as the Common Agenda 2015, which delineated our plan for a strengthened and aligned early care and education system. The first five years of implementation laid the foundation for a strong cross sector partnership focused on system alignment. As our community needs have evolved over the last five years so too has the work.

On February 26th, the SBA Work Group held a retreat to discuss the next steps in achieving the vision that every child in Alexandria have a strong start in life and in school. The retreat provided the opportunity for the group to revisit the goals and projects of the Common Agenda framework and served as the kick-off meeting for the writing of the Common Agenda 2020. The first goal of the retreat was to examine the Common Agenda framework to determine whether its organization,

expected outcomes, and projects still accurately reflected the needs of children and families within the community. The second was to discuss and gather commitments from SBA partners for activities they would pursue to support the outcomes of the Common Agenda 2020. The final goal was to discuss and begin to define shared outcomes for SBA across the participating organizations.

In the Common Agenda 2020, SBA has identified four focus areas to frame our work: **System Alignment, Access, Family Connections, and Quality**. Additionally, the **Backbone** continues to fulfill essential ongoing functions related to sustaining both the work and the infrastructure needed to support our efforts. While the focus areas are a consistent element of the strategic framework, specific strategies, projects, and outcomes are reviewed and updated annually to reflect current priorities based on community needs.





---

# A Focused Approach on Quality with Family Day Home Providers

The majority of the preschool funds invested in Alexandria are concentrated on pre-Kindergarten, with less focus on the crucial 0-3 years and Family Day Home (FDH) providers. FDH providers are an important, and often forgotten, partner in the early care and education system. In our city, 113 licensed and/or regulated providers care for our youngest children yet access to quality learning and professional development for them is not always prioritized.

In partnership with The Center for Alexandria's Children (CAC), SBA has focused on enhancing the quality of FDH providers by piloting a curriculum to support the intentional teaching of infants and toddlers. The CAC's Learn&PlayGroup Curriculum, initially written for use with playgroups, provides twelve units of exploration to use as a tool for lesson planning and engagement. The curriculum also embeds key elements of the Strengthening Families model.

The pilot was launched in September with ten FDH providers and will continue until May 2021. A key measure of success will be qualitative data collected from participants. During each meeting, participants are asked a series of questions regarding the use of the curriculum, ideas for extensions, and activities to be added or removed. The Curriculum Specialist also completes observations of the programs to provide feedback on the implementation of the curriculum in the programs. Additionally, we are piloting Virginia's new Early Learning and Development Standards and providing feedback to Virginia's Department of Education on the use and training needs from the perspective of FDH providers.

In the Summer of 2021, we will rewrite the curriculum based on the feedback received and partner with a university to have it read; redesign it for use with FDH providers; translate it into three additional languages, Spanish, Amharic, and Arabic; and develop a process to share it throughout our community. The curriculum pilot has the potential to have a far-reaching impact on FDH providers in Alexandria and across the Commonwealth.



---

# Reimagining the Early Care and Education Funding Approach

In 2020, leaders of the early care and education system continued to build on the work of our Local Funding Pilot, focused on developing a more systematic and equitable approach for awarding local government funding. A group of early care and education leaders met regularly to determine the most efficient, transparent and equitable ways to allocate available funding for Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) eligible students. The group looked at the costs of running a high-quality program as well as the services families value and need. The group determined an average cost per student and costs for: school day programming, extended day, summer, and family support services. The city's providers of preK services are now better positioned to leverage existing funding streams in a way that recognizes variations in the provider's business models, addresses sustainability, and provides a clear understanding of investment levels needed to maximize quality and equitable service delivery.

As a result of the Local Funding Pilot, providers put forward a coordinated ask for increased local funding for FY21 and beyond, which led to the City Manager recommending \$505,000 of additional funding. The coordinated ask was based on data and information learned from collaboration among private providers to provide local government with very detailed information regarding family's needs and priorities for early care and education and their capacity to meet those needs. This coordinated ask also provided transparency around how the additional funding would be used.

Due to the budgetary constraints caused by COVID-19, the funding was deferred. However, lessons learned include the power of collaboration, coordinated asks, and transparency. Partners remain committed to these elements in their work going forward and once the City's financial condition recovers from COVID-19 impacts, we will continue the conversation about increased early childhood funding with the understanding that the City is committed to increasing investment when possible.

In an effort to further leverage local funding, SBA also put forth an application for the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation's Mixed Delivery Grant. The application, in partnership with The Campagna Center, The Child and Family Network Centers, and Creative Play School, was one of three funded throughout the state. As a result of this grant, Alexandria has been awarded a two-year grant of \$570,000 per year to support quality preschool experiences and expand services for 60 three and four-year olds.



---

# 2020 Work Group Members

**Jennifer Ayers**, Executive Director, ALIVE!

**Laura Basu**, Early Childhood Special Education Coordinator, Alexandria City Public Schools

**Kara Blankner**, Philanthropic Advisor, Frank and Betty Wright Foundation

**Deborah Bowers**, Public Health Nurse Manager, Alexandria Health Department

**Dr. Poornima Chandra**, Pediatrician, Neighborhood Health

**Debra Collins**, Deputy City Manager, City of Alexandria

**Robin Crawley**, Chief, Early Childhood Division, City of Alexandria

**Jackie Hortsmann Didio**, Executive Director, The Child and Family Network Centers

**Jim Epstein**, Board of Trustees, Frank and Betty Wright Foundation

**Ellen Kennedy Folts**, CEO, Bruhn-Morris Family Foundation\*

**Kate Garvey**, Director, Department of Community and Human Services, City of Alexandria\*

**Dr. Stephen Haering**, Director, Alexandria Health Department

**Dr. Stacey Hardy-Chandler**, Director, Center for Children and Families, City of Alexandria

**J. Glenn Hopkins**, President and CEO, Hopkins House

**Michelle Smith Howard**, Executive Director, Smart Beginnings Alexandria\*

**Dr. Gregory Hutchings**, Superintendent, Alexandria City Public Schools\*

**Dr. Tammy Mann**, President and CEO, The Campagna Center\*

**Sean McEneaney**, Past Chair, Children, Youth & Families Collaborative Commission

**Lori Morris**, President, Bruhn-Morris Family Foundation\*

**Dr. Terri Mozingo**, Chief of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership, Alexandria City Public Schools\*

**Clint Page**, Chief Accountability Officer, Alexandria City Public Schools

**Nanci Pedulla**, Director, Healthy Families Program, Northern Virginia Family Services

**Giselle Pelaez**, Executive Director, The Center for Alexandria's Children

**Jane Richardson**, Early Childhood Coordinator, Alexandria City Public Schools

**Diane Smalley**, Director, Creative Play School

**Heidi Haggerty Wagner**, Principal, Alexandria City Public Schools

**Brandi Yee**, Chief Program Officer, ACT for Alexandria

\*Steering Committee Member



ALEXANDRIA

For more information:

311 Cameron Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
[www.sbalexandria.org](http://www.sbalexandria.org)  
[info@sbalexandria.org](mailto:info@sbalexandria.org)



A Proud Partner of the Virginia  
Smart Beginnings Network