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VECF believes that advancing school readiness in Virginia is the most effective strategy for ensuring a strong, vital workforce. Families, communities and schools play critical roles in helping children be prepared for success in school, the workforce, and life. VECF is committed to building capacity to effectively advance school readiness by convening and supporting the network of Smart Beginnings communities across the Commonwealth.

In order to support community capacity for advancing school readiness, VECF offers this Framework for Smart Beginnings. This Framework can be implemented by local early childhood systems to support the healthy growth and school readiness of young children. The Framework stands on the Core Principles of Smart Beginnings:

- Public and private responsibility
- Cross-sector collaboration
- Service as a non- partisan community “convener” for multiple stakeholders
- Commitment to evidence-based programs and practices
- Data-driven decision-making
- Targeting outcomes and focus on results
- Dynamic two-way, local-to-state structure

VECF supports implementation of the Framework in communities by providing on-going technical assistance and an active learning community to ensure the development and sustainability of community leadership, skills, and commitment to promoting comprehensive school readiness. Technical assistance is informed by local need and provided in response to the diverse and unique challenges faced by communities.

The Framework asserts the following areas of focus and strategic objectives to inform and mobilize local systems’ planning for a successful school readiness agenda. Local systems will utilize the Framework and Core Principles of Smart Beginnings to project and strive toward targeted results for their communities.

FOCUS: Leadership and Capacity



A hallmark of mature Smart Beginnings communities is the presence of an effective community structure with committed and informed leadership, collaborative strategic planning and target-setting, leveraged investments for school readiness efforts, and shared accountability. In these communities, Smart Beginnings is the trusted, credible convener of diverse partners to collaboratively address optimal development for young children. Diverse, committed leaders’ decisions and actions will be facilitated by expert staff, informed by data analysis, driven by collaborative goal-setting, and intent on documenting results.

VECF is committed to supporting communities’ expertise to make efficient use of existing resources, to document these efficiencies, and to advance policy solutions. An important role for Smart Beginnings is to ensure that families can access existing programs supporting children’s healthy development (such as health insurance coverage, immunizations, VPI, Head Start, etc.).

Objective 1: *Establish and sustain an effective structure of public-private leadership to guide local early childhood systems development.*

SMART BEGINNINGS' ROLE:

- Identify and engage key leaders with the ability to influence policies and practices
- Coordinate collaborative strategic planning, target-setting, and a system for accountability
- Access data and analyses that position leaders well to set targets and strategically address gaps
- Build public will to develop and implement strategies and policies to address these issues
- Develop intentional strategies to ensure long-term sustainability of the comprehensive local early childhood system

SAMPLE STRATEGIES:

- Coordinate periodic self-assessment of the diversity of skills, community connections and influence of the leadership body to guide development planning
- Build a structure/process for succession of leadership into the organizational by-laws
- Provide an opportunity for orientation for all new leadership body members
- Employ practices that make the most efficient and effective use of every meeting

RESULTS:

Strategic plan and locally-identified, measureable goals; diverse leadership with shared accountability; community commitment and leveraged investment; documented efficiencies; policy improvement.

Objective 2: *Identify and address access /quality challenges in existing programs for children and families.*

SMART BEGINNINGS' ROLE:

- Identify and address a core policy/programmatic barrier (VECF prioritizes VPI unless a community's data indicate a more urgent priority)
- Inform local and state policy improvement agenda
- Develop and implement strategies to improve integrated and effective service delivery
- Implement coordinated local strategies to address barriers to access to and eligibility for public preschool services (such as VPI, Head Start, Part B) or another publicly-provided service such as FAMIS health insurance coverage, immunizations, Part C, WIC, or home visiting
- Support public awareness and engagement in development and implementation of quality improvement strategies

SAMPLE STRATEGIES:

- Engage leadership in problem solving and decision making regarding community issues
- Facilitate leadership involvement in understanding policy implications from local experiences
- Inform and support the role of leadership in holding the community accountable for the outcomes and targets identified in the strategic plan

RESULTS:

Documented efficiencies; policy improvement; increased #/% of children receiving needed services in existing programs.

Objective 3: *Build community will and support through public awareness, public engagement and advocacy.*

SMART BEGINNINGS' ROLE:

- Build public support and understanding of school readiness by leveraging/utilizing the influence of SB diverse leadership to inform and engage peers and targeted stakeholders (funders, local elected leaders, policymakers, media)
- Promote partnerships and messaging that position school readiness and Smart Beginnings' efforts as part of workforce development and economic competitiveness
- Thoughtfully and strategically educate and engage policymakers and legislators as a non-partisan, substantive resource on local school readiness issues

SAMPLE STRATEGIES:

- Convene a public awareness committee
- Develop a public awareness plan that identifies key messages, messengers, and target audiences, and aligns with the Core Principles of Smart Beginnings

RESULTS:

Increased public awareness, understanding, and will to address barriers to school readiness.

FOCUS: Data-Driven Decision-Making



VECF asserts the importance of using valid and reliable data and thoughtful analysis to drive community decisions, as well as effective metrics and measurement to discern the effectiveness of interventions. VECF is committed to building communities' capacity to set goals for targeted results and to work collaboratively to achieve them.

Objective 4: *Improve community will and capacity to use data to guide collaborative decision-making; to set ambitious and attainable community targets; and to measure, track, and report results.*

SMART BEGINNINGS' ROLE:

- Implement strategies that increase community capacity to identify, analyze, and utilize current, meaningful data
- Facilitate the use of data to guide strategic planning and establish community targets for improvement in early childhood indicators of concern
- Coordinate a process for periodic review and analysis of data to support quality improvement and accountability

SAMPLE STRATEGIES:

- Use data sources such as Virginia's School Readiness Report Card, interactive data map and Kids Count Data to access key local indicator data
- Coordinate local relationships that nurture will and capacity for data sharing

RESULTS:

Strategic plan and locally-identified, measureable goals; data driven decisions; community focus on prominent trends indicated by early childhood data; community capacity to monitor progress toward identified targets and impact on early childhood indicators.

FOCUS: Mitigating Risk Early



VECF is committed to supporting communities' capacity to identify children with unique and multiple risks early and to target efforts to ensure their potential for healthy development and school readiness. Through effective data analysis, communities can identify high-risk populations within their neighborhoods. Discerning need, barriers, outreach strategies, and most effective approaches for support are critical to ensuring the success of high-risk and vulnerable children and families (including families facing education and income disparities; children with delays or disabilities; English learners; families who are homeless; and families with members serving in the military).

Objective 5: *Identify early the needs of children/populations with multiple or unique risks and coordinate the array of essential services needed to address multiple risks.*

SMART BEGINNINGS' ROLE:

- Engage in exploration and discovery regarding the needs and barriers for a specific population
- Identify key partners for engagement to address the challenges/initiative
- Select and promote evidence-based and evidence-informed strategies for addressing the needs

SAMPLE STRATEGIES

- Increase enrollment/reach for additional and coordinated support services (FAMIS, immunization, breast feeding, child care, housing, mental health services, skills training, employment education, etc.) for a population determined by the community needs assessment/ data analysis

RESULTS:

Locally defined outcomes; increased #/% of target population with access to appropriate services.

FOCUS: Healthy Births and Healthy Development



VECF recognizes that the foundation for lifelong health and the prevention of chronic health issues is formed during prenatal and early childhood development.

Objective 6: *Improve availability of and access to evidence-based or evidence-informed programs and practices to support healthy pregnancy, birth and child development.*

SMART BEGINNINGS' ROLE:

- Engage in exploration and discovery regarding concerning health indicators
- Identify the gaps and barriers that exist in the current health services system
- Identify key partners for engagement to address the gaps and barriers
- Select/promote evidence-based/-informed strategies for addressing gaps

SAMPLE STRATEGIES:

- Partner with Project SEED to increase availability and access to developmental screenings by trained health, child care, or other practitioners prior to age 3 using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire including the social-emotional component (ASQ-SE)
- Coordinate access to CSEFEL social emotional training for providers
- Coordinate community implementation of evidence-based obesity prevention approaches for child care programs, such as the Early Care and Education Learning Collaboratives training or Nutritional and Physical Activity Self Assessments for Child Care Programs
- Improve participation rate of eligible families in the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) nutritional supplemental program

RESULTS:

Locally defined outcomes and targets based on evidence-based strategies; increased # of families accessing targeted health services; improved health outcomes, such as increase in access to prenatal care in the 1st trimester, decreased low birth weight births, increased rate of immunization increased #/% of breastfed babies; increased number of children entering kindergarten at healthy weight.

FOCUS: Supported and Supportive Families



VECF believes in the importance of supporting and partnering with parents and families, since the home environment and relationship with parents have the most profound and enduring impact on children's healthy development. Evidence-based and evidence-informed parent and family support programs such as home visiting, parent education, and maternal/child health services have positive effects on the health and stability of families, especially those challenged with multiple risks.

Objective 7: *Increase availability and access to evidence-based or evidence-informed services for families challenged by multiple risk factors.*

SMART BEGINNINGS' ROLE:

- Select and promote evidence-based and evidence-informed strategies for increasing access to health and family support programs and services, especially for high-risk families

SAMPLE STRATEGIES:

- Convene a local cross-sector consortium of family support service providers (home visiting, parent education, etc.) to explore barriers to availability and access to quality service for families challenged by multiple risk factors and identify gaps in the current family support system
- Facilitate use of data and other information to establish target population, baseline/s and benchmark/s to support accountability and quality improvement
- Support quality improvement of current family support services, and/or integration of additional evidence-based or evidence-informed programs into the current family support system based on need/s identified by the local community assessment (see Family Support section of the VECF 2012 Evidenced Based Directory)
- Assure capacity to implement evaluation based on the evidence-based model, including measurement, tracking, reporting and analysis of data
- Establish a process for reporting standardized outcomes to measure effectiveness of services based on the evidence-based model

RESULTS:

Increased #/% of high-risk families participating in high quality home visiting and parenting services.

FOCUS: High Quality Early Learning



VECF identifies children's access to high quality early learning experiences as a primary strategy for advancing school readiness. Research indicates that a primary strategy for advancing school readiness is focusing on access to high quality early learning provided by competent teachers resulting in higher kindergarten readiness scores.

Objective 8: *Increase availability and access to quality early learning for children birth to age five.*

SMART BEGINNINGS' ROLE:

- Address policy barriers to promote full utilization of preschool resources
- Select/promote evidence-based and evidence-informed strategies, including VSQI, for improving quality of early learning settings
- Identify key partners and strategies to expand participation in and utilization of VSQI

SAMPLE STRATEGIES:

- Support efficient integration of evidence-based programs or practices into the current early childhood service system to better meet documented needs (see Early Care and Education section of the VECF 2012 Evidence Based Directory)
- Establish system capacity to assure accountability through data tracking and reporting, focused on both program and child outcomes
- Gather annual data regarding progress of implementation with targeted population for comparison with FY 2013 baseline
- Report standardized outcomes, progress, and barriers to community leaders
- Partner with the VSQI regional lead organization to meet federal data collection and Quality Performance Report Requirements
- Support quality improvement through development of improvement, maintenance or expansion strategies
- Guide outreach efforts to increase provider participation and parent awareness of VSQI and features of quality early education
- Explore opportunities to expand resources available to improve the quality of early learning programs

RESULTS:

Increased #/% of children participating in VPI and high quality preschool; increased #/% of early learning settings focused on quality ; increased #/% of children participating in quality-focused early learning; increased #/% of teachers accessing specialized skills training; improved kindergarten readiness scores.

Objective 9: *Improve the competency of the early childhood workforce through increased access to professional development and specialized training that supports effective teaching and interactions with young children to reliably foster their physical, cognitive and social-emotional development.*

SMART BEGINNINGS' ROLE:

- Develop strategies and pathways to meet professional development needs
- Assure that professional development opportunities effectively promote the specific competencies that support effective teaching and interactions

SAMPLE STRATEGIES:

- Link professional development opportunities and incentives to VSQI participation
- Complete a workforce study on qualifications and training needs of early childhood teachers
- Partner with the regional lead agency to provide targeted technical assistance to VSQI participants
- Engage community colleges/universities and CDA providers to expand availability of high quality early childhood courses
- Explore resources available to fund scholarships for eligible providers
- Increase public awareness of early childhood professions, and the resources available to pursue those professions
- Partner with and promote high quality professional development opportunities

RESULTS:

Colleges /universities providing leadership to support early childhood professional development; data gathered and reported on the # and focus of professional development opportunities, # of teachers participating in high quality professional development. # of teachers meeting VSQI practitioner qualifications and professional development goals; # of teachers receiving targeted TA through VSQI participation

Objective 10: *Establish pathways for smooth transition of children from home to child care to preschool to elementary school.*

SMART BEGINNINGS' ROLE:

- Coordinate outreach to families, child care providers, preschools and the elementary schools
- Educate community partners regarding the research and best practices for supporting transition
- Increase parent and provider awareness of Virginia's early learning standards to improve understanding of school readiness and child development
- Coordinate opportunities for partnerships among families, child care providers, preschools and the elementary school systems

SAMPLE STRATEGIES:

- Teacher networks to bring child care, preschool and elementary staff together
- Coordinate cross-sector provider training regarding research and best practices that support smooth transitions for children
- Neighborhood school readiness task forces that bring families, childcare, preschool and elementary school teachers together
- Alignment of curriculum with Virginia's Milestones of Child Development, Foundation Blocks, and K-3 SOLS across childcare, preschool and elementary settings
- Use of aligned K readiness assessment tools and strategies to inform and guide teachers at each point in the early childhood experience
- K registration events that inform and engage parents in transition practices

RESULTS:

Increased social-emotional readiness; increased on-time Kindergarten enrollment; increased first day attendance; assessment of developmental delays prior to Kindergarten; increased parent involvement with schools.