

## Smart Beginnings Virginia Peninsula Unveils FirstSpark in New Brand Launch

Smart Beginnings Virginia Peninsula is proud to announce the launch of a new brand and identify as part of a reorganization of Virginia’s early childhood system.

“We are thrilled to announce Smart Beginnings Virginia Peninsula is now FirstSpark,” noted Diane Umstead, Executive Director of FirstSpark. “I’ve been so proud to lead the work of Smart Beginnings Virginia Peninsula over the last seven years. As we launch our new brand and identity, FirstSpark is poised to take our early childhood systems building work to a new level!”

The new brand was announced as part of a regional Early Childhood Symposium held on May 31 at William and Mary Alumni House. The launch coincided with the first regional meeting of FirstSpark’s early childhood partnership, with stakeholders in attendance from across the new region.



**Jamalia Shipman, Board Chair for FirstSpark, unveils new brand at the Early Childhood Symposium. Below, Diane Umstead, Executive Director of FirstSpark, talks with local media about the work ahead.**



FirstSpark, serving as the lead agency for Ready Region Chesapeake Bay, is one of nine new regions that has been created in an ambitious and bold restructuring of the early childhood system in the Commonwealth.

“Our new brand and identity truly embody the mission and vision of FirstSpark,” noted Jamalia Shipman, Board Chair for the nonprofit organization. “It was part of an extensive rebranding effort for our organization. “First” of course speaks to the earliest years of life. Along with “Spark,” the new brand represents the thirst for knowledge and education in the early years that will catapult a young child to life-long success.”

With expertise from The Brand Federation, the organization engaged numerous stakeholders for feedback and analyzed market data from across the Commonwealth as part of the process.

### Early Childhood Symposium Draws Big Crowd

With more than 125 partners in attendance, FirstSpark launched a new early childhood initiative as part of the regional Early Childhood Symposium held early this year at the College of William and Mary.

In the first-ever symposium of its kind, participants gathered to learn more about the new statewide early childhood system that is being rolled out across the Commonwealth, and how – for the first time – the nine new regions will cover every community in the state.



**More than 125 early childhood advocates stand together at the May Symposium.**

Partners also learned more about their own region – Ready Region Chesapeake Bay – and how local communities will be critical to informing local, regional, and state leaders regarding early childhood priorities. FirstSpark understands that the perspectives of local partners will be essential to this new model.

### Exactly What Is Ready Regions?

Virginia has a unique and unprecedented opportunity to transform its early childhood systems with the launch of Ready Regions. In partnership with local early childhood initiatives such as



FirstSpark, the Commonwealth is developing a statewide system that will expand access to quality early care and education and essential health, development and social emotional support services for young children, birth to five, and their families.

# Early Childhood Takes Center Stage at William and Mary

The Early Childhood Symposium featured speakers and panelists that represented all sectors of early childhood, from parents to business leaders. The keynote speaker was Ann Macheras, Group Vice President at the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. Panelists included:

- *Jessica Davis, School Superintendent, Lancaster Public Schools*
- *Leslie Franklin, Wiley Foundation*
- *Mike Petters, Retired President & CEO Huntington Ingalls Industries*
- *Jamie Ruffin, Center Director, Grand Kids, Gloucester*
- *Sojourner Stafford, Parent*

A significant part of the regional and state work will be the launch of a new quality measurement system for child care programs across the Commonwealth. Known as “VQB5,” the new system replaces the former Virginia Quality program and will work to dramatically expand participation of child care programs – both centers and in-home child care.

“We know that access to quality child care is of paramount importance to parents in our region,” noted Diane Umstead, Executive Director of FirstSpark. “For every 100 children in our region, there are only 69 seats available in child care settings. That is a big problem for families, especially families with limited resources. Access to quality child care should be available to ALL families.”



Above, partners from Mile High Kids were among those attending. Top right, Jeanna Conway, Deputy Superintendent of Early Childhood for VDOE, discussed state priorities. Center right, Ann Macheras, keynote speaker from the Federal Reserve. Bottom right, Sojourner Stafford (speaking) was part of a panel of experts. Below left, partners analyze regional data.



## Chesapeake Bay's Regional Coalition Taking Shape

The launch of RRCB marks the beginning of an ambitious new early childhood coalition that is quickly gaining momentum across the Chesapeake Bay Region, from the Lower Peninsula to the Northern Neck!



Local partners in the Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck at planning retreat in June.

In the coming months, FirstSpark will be leading efforts to engage early childhood stakeholders across this new regional footprint. The work will be anchored by a regional coalition of partners that will include members from across this new territory. In the initial launch, we anticipate this coalition will meet twice a year. Please stay tuned for more on upcoming meeting dates.

Also vital to this work will be local partnerships to drive systems level work. One such group has already launched in the Northern Neck/Middle Peninsula, and two other local groups are taking shape to represent the lower and upper Peninsulas from the City of Hampton to James City County.

### Join us for EC Regional Roundtable October 26

FirstSpark is pleased to announce an Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Regional Roundtable that will bring together people from difference early childhood perspectives to talk about ECCE experiences in their region. Roundtables across the Commonwealth will be used to update Virginia's ECCE Strategic Plan. Due to limited seating, we ask that organizations, providers and families send one representative to ensure an array of voices are represented. For more information, contact Kim Bloom with FirstSpark at: [kbloom@firstsparkva.org](mailto:kbloom@firstsparkva.org)

# Data Dive: Local Partners Begin Identifying Priorities



Early childhood partners from across the Chesapeake Bay Region rolled up their collective sleeves and took a deep dive into local and regional child care data during the Early Childhood Symposium. Guests representing all areas of RRCB were organized by geography and analyzed data that highlighted:

- Number of child care programs in each region
- Number of licensed child care slots
- Share of potential child care need unmet by licensed child care slots



Partners utilize local child care data in an interactive exercise to identify local and region priorities to ensure early childhood success.

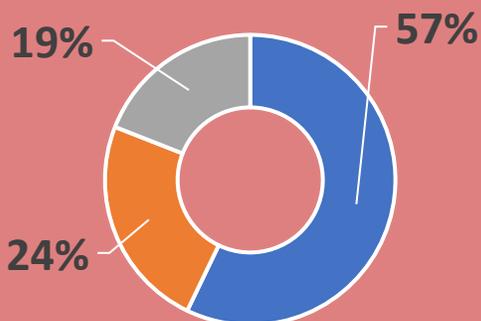
Individual tables identified the most pressing issues and priorities our region faces regarding early care and education.

**The top priorities included:** 1) Access to Early Childhood Services and Programs; 2) Access and Support for Parents and Families; 3) Prioritizing the Educator Workforce. **Here's what they prioritized:**



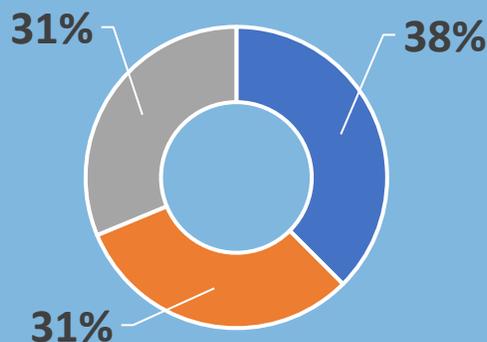
## Access to Early Childhood Programs and Services

- ▣ Increase Access
- ▣ Availability of Resources
- ▣ Increase Child Care Supply



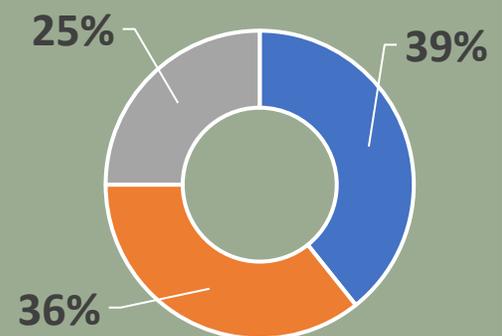
## Parents and Families

- ▣ Time/Ability/Resources for Families
- ▣ Parent and Family Engagement
- ▣ High Quality Experiences for Families



## Educator Workforce

- ▣ High Quality Workforce
- ▣ Educator Compensation/Benefits
- ▣ Workforce Retention



# FirstSpark and RRCB Set Sights on Families, Quality, Access

Families, access and quality are all important priorities for RRCB as we ensure that families have access to quality early childhood programs and services. Here are the critical areas that Region Regions is focusing on to create a unified early childhood system in our community and across Virginia:

- **Strengthening Quality:** Ensure all components are in place to coordinate quality measurement and guide improvement in publicly funded classrooms.
- **Building Relationships:** Engage with leaders across the region to facilitate buy-in for shared accountability and benefit.
- **Increasing Access:** Build and strengthen better processes to help parents learn about and access early childhood programs and services in their community, while helping service providers connect with families.
- **Engaging Families:** Establish and strengthen strategies and structures to ensure family engagement.

## Strengthening Quality

The Unified Virginia Quality Birth to Five System (VQB5) is a measurement and improvement system that focuses on teacher/child interactions and supports families to choose quality programming. FirstSpark staff members are supporting hundreds of child care programs across the new footprint.



## Building Relationships

RRCB is committed to partnering with other organizations and stakeholders across our 16 counties and cities to build a data-driven common agenda and robust regional coalition, supported by local planning groups to ensure a sustained and unified early childhood system.



## Increasing Access

RRCB is working to “coordinate enrollment” across publicly funded programs in the region to ensure:

- Parents easily learn where there are available spots and how to qualify.
- Providers keep sustained enrollment, communicate when they have openings, and are able to cover the true cost of services.



## Engaging Families

Families must be engaged in designing an early childhood system that works for them. To do this, RRCB is establishing Family Councils in our communities to better understand and the unique needs of our most vulnerable families.



## Initiative Prepares to Celebrate 20 Years of Early Childhood Systems Building

In the coming months you will learn more about a very special anniversary marking 20 years of early childhood systems building in our region!

In 2005 as Preschool Partners, this work began with the goal of ensuring all children enter school ready to learn. As Smart Beginnings Virginia Peninsula, the organization’s ultimate goal was that the children in our region be prepared socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually to enter kindergarten ready to succeed.



**Now as FirstSpark, we are celebrating 20 years of success, thanks to our partners. Stay tuned for celebration updates!**

## FirstSpark Board and Staff Leadership Formerly Smart Beginnings Virginia Peninsula

### Board of Directors

Jamilia Shipman, *Board Chair*  
Christopher Newport University

Rev. Dr. Todd Davidson, *Vice Chair*  
First Baptist Church of Hampton

Anthony “Miguel” Guarjardo, *Treasurer*  
ON Semiconductor

Gary R. Artybridge, Jr.,  
Huntington Ingalls Industries

Jace Brady  
Sentara Healthcare

Kirkpatrick “Kapua” Conley  
Sentara Careplex Hospital

Anthony Garland  
Riverside Health System

Dr. Sarita McCoy Gregory  
7 Cities.org, HBCU Unlimited LLC

Cleon Long  
Huntington Ingalls Industries

Senator Monty Mason  
Virginia State Senate

Dr. Kate Wolfe Maxlow  
Hampton City Schools

Davetta Rhinehart  
YMCA of the Virginia Peninsulas

Rajaka Tucker  
Huntington Ingalls Industries

Edith White  
Hampton Roads Community Action Program

### FirstSpark Staff Leadership

Diane Umstead, *Executive Director*

Julie Duregger, *Deputy Director*

Hilari Devine, *Early Childhood Systems Director*

Ciera Harris, *Finance and Operations Administrator*

[www.FirstSparkVa.org](http://www.FirstSparkVa.org)