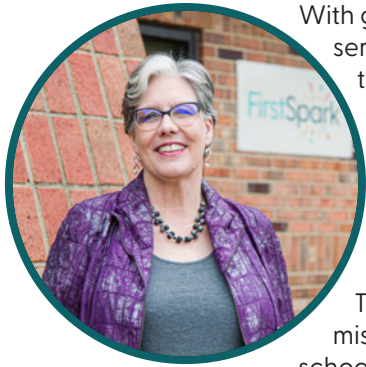


FirstSpark™



2024
ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT

A MESSAGE FROM OUR RETIRING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



With gratitude, I say farewell after serving for 6½ years as FirstSpark's third Executive Director in its two-decade history. Reflecting on my 46-year career as an educator and administrator, I've witnessed many community and societal changes affecting children, families and educators. This has caused me to make it my mission to influence and impact this school readiness movement. My early

work as a public school teacher involved teaching children in under-served communities. Later I offered family child care and started community-based programs where I built and managed international, employer-sponsored child care for Habitat for Humanity International (GA) and the World Bank (DC).

Completing 18 years of invaluable direct service stoked my desire to shift to public policy and long-term, systems level change. Work at a national organization led to pioneering school readiness projects with state governments. I served on MD's Eastern Shore where my eyes were opened to needs of rural residents. In AZ, I learned how towns, counties, and tribal communities with limited resources work together for change, leveraging funding through a tobacco tax that generated a new state early childhood office. Founding these systems with

colleagues was an amazing experience and prepared me to enter the oldest school readiness program in NC, where I led professional and board development with 72 organizations and was a national fellow with the BUILD Initiative's Equity Leaders Action Network.

My aging parents brought me back home to VA. I knew about the Smart Beginnings network and found out that a local non-profit in that network was seeking an Executive Director. After working at the state level, I was curious about how I could contribute locally. At FirstSpark, I have led our growth, proudly serving as the lead early childhood coordinating agency for half of my time. We expanded from 6 to 16 areas and built organizational capacity to significantly impact young children, families, and educators well into the future. This could not have been done without dedicated staff and board serving alongside me. Their expertise, strategic thinking and relationships have grown us into a well-known, well-connected regional early childhood leader. And while my own gifts of bringing people and ideas together will go on to benefit this collective, I am hopeful that those I've mentored across the country will hold leadership positions themselves in our sector. I humbly "pass the baton" to other champions in early childhood, the non-profit community and beyond.

With gratitude for everything,

Adriane

PARTNERSHIPS SPARK RESULTS

Collaboration sparks our interactions with early childhood educators and community partners. Together we are creating solutions that increase access to public and private early care and education, parent choice and resources for families as we serve our most vulnerable children prenatal to 5. A look at the latest data for our area, Ready Region Chesapeake Bay (16 cities/counties on the Greater VA Peninsula and Northern Neck), shows how our partnerships spark significant results:

- ◆ FirstSpark is in 807 classrooms, managing VA Quality Birth to Five and providing assessments, feedback and professional development. The children in these classrooms experienced higher rates of measured, quality interactions with their teachers in Spring 2024 than in Fall 2023. More than half the classrooms experienced improvement overall. Over 80% of classrooms prioritized for extra assistance saw improvement.* Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers ALL showed advancement on CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System), a national tool used statewide with all early learning sites.
- ◆ 62% of kindergarteners met Kindergarten Readiness benchmarks - up from 58% the year before.** FirstSpark is improving learning outcomes for children regardless of family income, language, race/ethnicity, or zip code.

- ◆ FirstSpark administers the Mixed Delivery Program for 3 & 4 year olds

- grant funding pays tuition for 222 children at 14 private child care sites. We help families meet the challenges of securing affordable, high-quality child care, while simultaneously supporting growth for child care businesses. Eligible parents who are asset-limited get reliable and consistent, full-day, full-year care and education for their youngsters. Child care businesses are guaranteed up to \$14,000/child per year, creating a finance model that supports the true cost of care. Virginia has the 9th highest cost of child care in the nation. Annual surveys confirm that affordability is the primary reason unserved families in our region don't have child care.

- ◆ Out of 1076 women screened by the Prenatal Resource Program, 853 (79%) were provided referrals to home visiting programs (including military programs). Our Family Council continues to put families first, supporting parents as they learn about state policies and prepare to advocate for themselves and their children.



*LinkB5 CLASS Scores Fall 23-Spring 24; percentages calculated by FirstSpark.

**Ready Regions ECCE Access Dashboard, VDOE

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT



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The Power of Play: Mixed Delivery & VQB5 in Action

For Lakisha Leeks, owner of Amazing Childcare and Learning Academy, participating in Mixed Delivery as part of Virginia's VQB5 program has been key to helping her grow her business and support greater numbers of families in her Newport News community. "Mixed Delivery has been a game changer for me. It's helped stabilize my business and prepared me for moving from my family day home to a center."

Mixed Delivery (MD) and Virginia Quality Birth to Five (VQB5) may not be the simplest terms to understand. Put simply, these state-funded programs are a robust ecosystem where everyone involved in preschool education - from parent, to child, and child care provider - influence one another.

Entering her fourth year as a provider, Ms. Leeks ultimately sees her program as a partnership with parents. "If parents don't want to send their child into a school building for preschool then they have another option." MD promotes family

choice by allowing families to choose private early-care and education providers (center or family day home) that meets their child's and family's needs and preferences.

"Mixed Delivery gives parents more options." By offering full-day, year-round early child care and education (ECCE) at low cost to eligible families, MD allows parents to join or return to the workforce.

MD also supports providers. "It allows us to have funding for quality child care," Ms. Leeks notes.

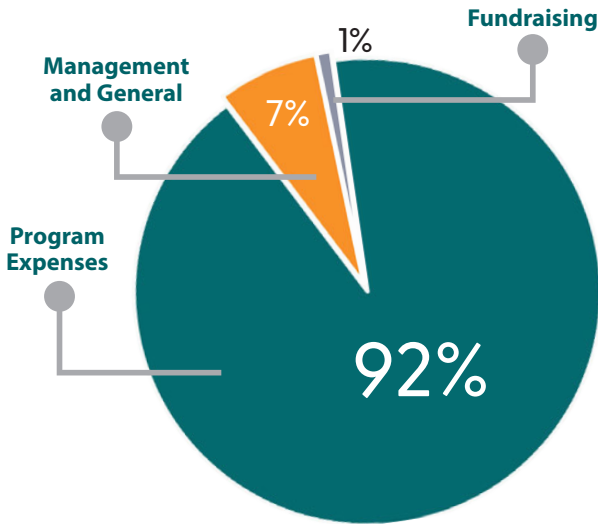
"Meaning I am able to buy educational materials and hire an assistant, which takes pressure off of me as the business owner."

VQB5 is an overall system that ensures children receive quality education from a state-approved curriculum with providers who are observed for professional development. Training and feedback programs have helped Ms. Leeks develop a play-based curriculum, where she and her staff can support a child's development across the spectrum of learning - including language, reading, interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence.

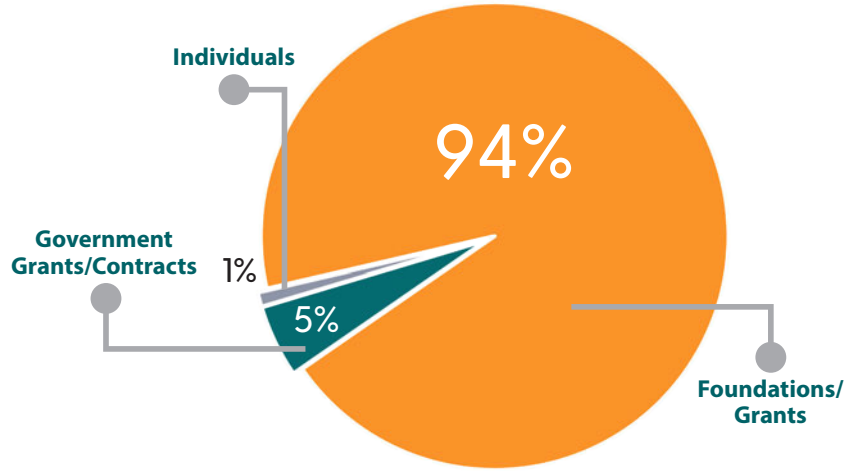
"You don't want to do rote learning," Ms. Leeks emphasizes. "VQB5 taught me to communicate with the children more - always ask them questions. I want them to feel confident in who they are, and able to share and play with others." Ms. Leeks' play-based curriculum allows for development to unfold in a highly interactive setting, where she sees everything as a learning experience. "I want them to like to learn. I want them to be ready to learn. I want them to like to read. I read stories to them multiple times a day. I want them to be ready to listen to a story, and then eventually, I want them to be wanting to read the story to someone else."

As Ms. Leeks prepares to move Amazing Childcare and Learning Academy from her family day home to a larger center, she reflects on the passion and commitment one needs to be a quality child care provider. "This is such a journey. It's a lot of work. But it's so important. I'm just really honored to be a part of child care. This is my purpose. I want to be able to be that resource for children and families."

2024 REVENUE AND EXPENSE ANALYSIS



TOTAL PROGRAM EXPENDITURES



TOTAL PROGRAM REVENUE

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FirstSpark Staff Leadership

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Hilari Devine, Early Childhood Systems Director

Ciera Harris, Finance and Operations Administrator

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