



2025

ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT

A Message from Our Board Chair



As the name FirstSpark reinforces, we believe that access to quality child care starts at birth. Those earliest moments matter—not just for individual children, but for families, communities, and the long-term strength of the Chesapeake Bay region.

In 2025, we remained focused on creating the conditions that nurture those ideals. Amid a shifting funding landscape and organizational leadership changes, we remain committed to supporting children, families, and educators with clarity, consistency, and meaningful educational content—so that quality early learning is not left to chance.

Many of you have met Julie Duregger while navigating the region's complex early childhood education ecosystem. Over the past 15 years, she has become deeply embedded in this work and the communities it serves—as a fundraiser, regional relationship builder and steady people leader, demonstrated through a variety of roles here at FirstSpark. It's this unique combination of organizational knowledge and ecosystem expertise that gives our Board—and Virginia's Early Childhood Foundation—confidence and excitement in announcing Julie as the new permanent Executive Director of FirstSpark.

"It is a privilege to step into the Executive Director role at FirstSpark. I am deeply committed to our mission and excited to advance our work for young children and families. I look forward to strengthening relationships—both new and longstanding—and working together to build a more connected, high-quality early childhood care and education system for our region."

Some of our most meaningful accomplishments this year reflect expanded access and deeper engagement. Read on to learn how our Family Council is elevating local voices, listening to their lived experiences, learning from real challenges, and gaining insight into how families navigate early childhood systems. We are also encouraged by the progress taking shape across the Commonwealth through the Virginia Business Roundtable for Early Education (VBREE), which brings together leaders across industries to strengthen early childhood care and the educational system their workforce depends on. These cross-sector partnerships reinforce a simple truth: when communities work together, everyone benefits.

FirstSpark is well-practiced and committed to stewarding resources carefully—but as the demand for our services continues to grow, so does the need for strengthened commitments and partnerships from the communities served. Unrestricted support from individuals and businesses are essential to FirstSpark remaining flexible, responsive, and rooted in community needs. We invite local businesses to take a vested interest in their communities—because strong early childhood systems are not only a social good, but a sound economic investment in our shared future.

We are grateful for the continued trust and partnership that make this work possible. Together, we can ensure that the first spark—at birth—continues to light the way forward.

— Miguel Guajardo, Board Chairman

Family Council's Small Yet Mighty Imprint

Chesapeake Bay region families are identifying real barriers to early childhood education and sharing that feedback directly with Ready Regions state leaders. With just four families involved as of early 2024, the Family Council tripled in size this year to include 14 members representing eight of the 16 cities and counties in the region—an important step that broadens community representation to more closely reflect the families FirstSpark serves.

One of the Family Council's most meaningful contributions is its feedback to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) on how to make agency documents

more accessible, family-friendly, and genuinely useful. Their recommendations led to clearer language, more engaging formats, and practical improvements that help caregivers better understand their child's learning data.

Throughout this work, FirstSpark prioritized transparency and accountability. Family Council members were kept informed through intentional feedback loops—showing how their ideas progressed, who heard them, and what changed as a result. This ongoing communication reinforces a core belief: families are not just participants in the system—they are partners shaping it.



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PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

Ensuring Equitable Access Across the Chesapeake Bay Region

Virginia Quality Birth to Five (VQB5) is the Commonwealth's quality measurement and improvement system for early childhood programs, overseen by the Virginia Department of Education. By clearly defining what high-quality early childhood education looks like—from birth through age five, across child care centers, family day homes, Head Start, and public schools—VQB5 gives each region a consistent framework to measure, track, and improve classroom quality.

As FirstSpark entered the 2025–26 program year, our VQB5 team focused on programming that would improve teacher-child interactions, a key indicator for closing quality gaps. Using the prior year's observation data, the team identified a childcare center network with eight classrooms that would benefit from additional support based on their scores.

With strong buy-in from program administrators, our team engaged the entire staff across all locations—working with

more than 40 lead and assistant educators serving infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. We provided context to teachers on how classrooms are assessed, gave them the time and space to problem solve real-life classroom interactions, and shared resources to help everyone measure and continue to improve upon their professional skills.

The results were significant. Following the session, 82% of participating classrooms improved their average score, with just two classrooms falling below state averages. This work underscores a powerful truth: when educators clearly understand what quality looks like—and are given time, tools, and targeted support—meaningful improvement can happen quickly. In just four to six hours of focused professional learning, classrooms across the Chesapeake Bay Ready Region can build their expertise, improving outcomes for children and families alike.

VQB5 Data Snapshot

SCALE & REACH

225

TOTAL SITES SERVED

816

CLASSROOMS IMPACTED

1632

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

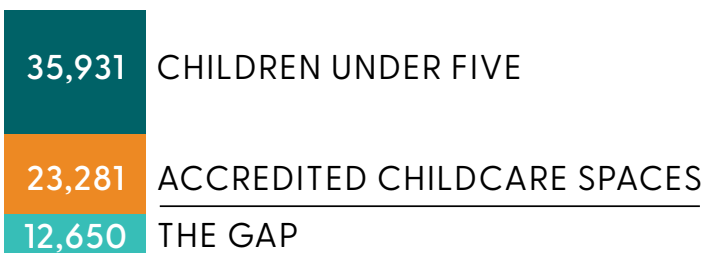
ACROSS DIVERSE CARE ENVIRONMENTS AND DEVELOPMENT STAGE



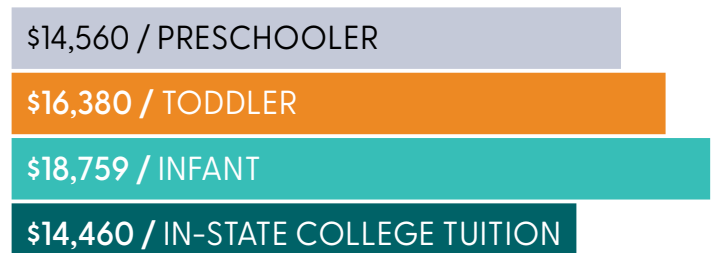
State funding only covers our operational costs. Help us expand access to quality childcare across the Chesapeake Bay Region.

READY REGION SNAPSHOT

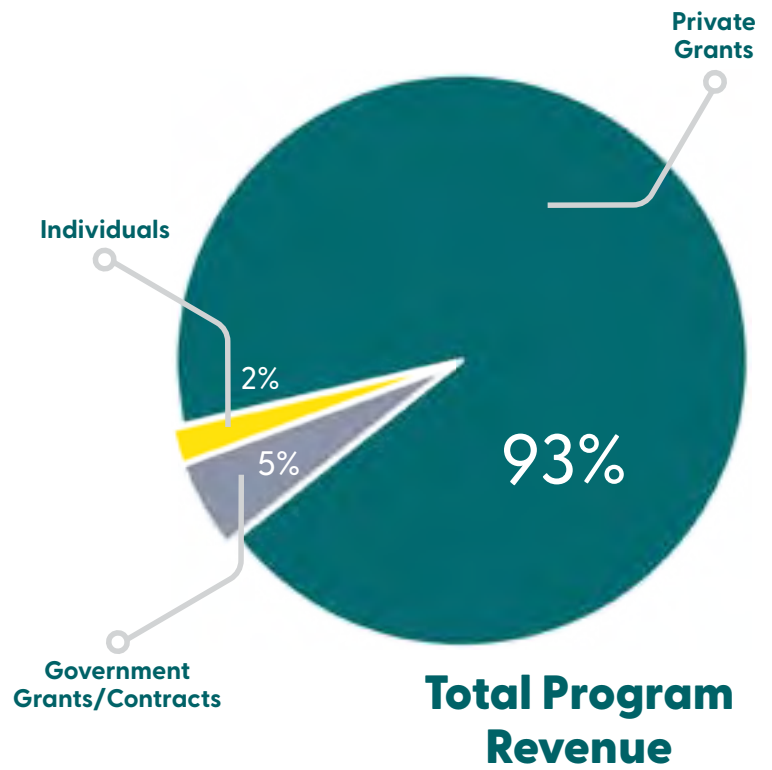
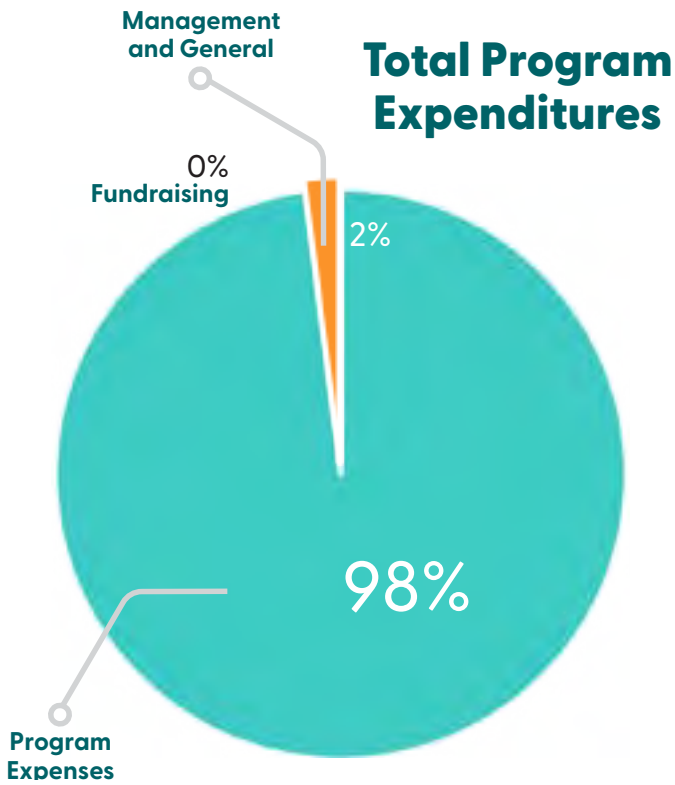
1 in 3 Children Lack Access to Accredited Childcare



Annual Cost of Quality Education



2025 Revenue and Expense Analysis



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