

# Smart Beginnings: Ready for school. Ready for life.

BY NANCY P. SYKES



TESS GOLDBLATT

At the Downtown Hampton Child Development Center, Teacher Assistant Izumi Scott helps budding young artists Juliannah Rodriguez and Jamir Sedgwick.

**S**mart Beginnings Virginia Peninsula (SBVP) is a public-private collaboration coordinated by the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation. The local initiative began five years ago when those who cared about young children (educators, parents, community leaders) sought community and business support to improve programs for pre-kindergarten children.

"More than 85 percent of a child's brain develops before the age of five," says Amy Behm, education director at Downtown Hampton Child Development Center (DHCDC), a nationally accredited program. DHCDC is a 501(c)(3) organization, dating back to 1971. Jaynelle Oehler, executive director, says, "We all care about the children and want to make things better for them."

Behm also serves as a mentor for three other childhood centers in Hampton. She sets up classrooms, acquires materials and provides train-

ing. A former teacher, Behm has been at DHCDC for 10 years. "It has grown from one center with 30 children to four centers with more than 350 children," says Behm.

Smart Beginnings serves as an umbrella, including parents, child care professionals, and business and civic leaders. Also included are other childhood centers and Head Start, which is federally funded and has a waiting list. "The need is great," says Oehler. "If we all help each other, we can grow stronger."

Studies have shown that children who are ill-prepared for challenges in school will have difficulty facing challenges in life. Investing in early childhood development yields tremendous economic and social benefits. The young children of today are Virginia's workforce of the future. Increasingly, businesses and communities are recognizing this.

Smart Beginnings works to build a network of local partnerships for improving early childhood services. Businesses

are becoming more supportive, ranging from making financial contributions to adopting family-friendly policies for their workers.

Another organization, Preschool Partners, is under the umbrella. Ivy Mitchell, founder and coordinator, finds mentors, raises funds and promotes the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). This Virginia initiative provides simple, independent public ratings of child care quality to help parents make informed choices for their children. It goes further by offering technical assistance, training and improvement incentives to the early child care centers. The overall goal is raising the quality of care for the benefit of the children and, ultimately, the community.

A maximum of five stars can be awarded. "Every childhood center should be at least a three-star," says Mitchell. "Parents need to know about this program." Once a center enters the rating system, mentors help draft a plan for improving quality. Only seven of 120 centers on the Virginia Peninsula are currently in the program. "By next summer there should be 30," says Mitchell.

Funding currently comes from a variety of sources: grants, fundraising efforts, individuals and organizations.

All three women are involved in serving on the workgroups of SBVP. Oehler and Mitchell serve on the Leadership Council. Last year 90 percent of high-risk four-year-olds at DHCDC scored in the average or above average range on the State's PAK's pre-literacy screening. These scores are a strong indicator for success in school.

This coalition is about providing education and awareness about the quality differences in local child care centers. It is also about creating a quality experience at a young age to help ensure a long term investment in the workforce of the Peninsula. ◀

## TO THE Point

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**Vision:** All children on the Virginia Peninsula will enter kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed in school and life.