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Panel: Early learning crucial to success

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Education experts spelled out clearly Thursday that teaching students at a young age, even before they start school, is crucial to their success.

"All too often, those who start behind, stay behind," Smart Beginnings Director Miriam Rushfinn said. "If we want to address the achievement gap, this is where it starts, from [ages] 0 to 5."

Robert C. Pianta, dean of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, made a presentation at UVa to a crowd of local educators, elected officials, business leaders and others on the progress of the local Smart Beginnings

initiative to improve childhood readiness for school.

Pianta said young students receive great benefits when teachers actually guide them through solving problems, as opposed to being asked to memorize. While teachers should challenge students with rigorous assignments, they also have to teach in a way that students find relevant, to engage students, Pianta said.



Pianta

In 2007, the Charlottesville/Albemarle Partnership for Children, the United Way — Thomas Jefferson Area and the Curry School, along with communi-

ty and business leaders, received a \$400,000 grant from the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation to develop Smart Beginnings' public-private partnership, to promote school readiness, organizers said.

Since then, Smart Beginnings has provided family support, such as increasing families' access to high-quality child care services, Rushfinn said, as well as providing literature that helps parents know whether their children are developing on time and guidelines for preparing their children for school.

Smart Beginnings leaders have also started a program at Crozet Elementary School in which teachers meet with child care

providers, to give providers guidance about what they can do to help children develop, Rushfinn said.

Rushfinn said that providing high-quality education to students at a young age is a benefit to not only the students but also businesses and the community at large. She said that childhood development is an investment that benefits everyone in a community long-term.

Pianta said high-quality teachers are the key to students' success early on, adding that instructional coaches can also help teachers become better at their jobs.

"Any professional NFL player has a whole bunch of coaches working to make them better," he said.