



# Young Virginians: Ready, Willing, And Unable To Serve

**75 Percent of Young Adults Cannot  
Join the Military;  
Early Education across  
Virginia is Needed to  
Ensure National Security**

**A Report by**



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**MISSION: READINESS**  
MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS

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## Acknowledgements

MISSION: READINESS – MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS is the bipartisan, nonprofit, national security organization of more than 80 retired generals and admirals. The military leaders of MISSION: READINESS call on all policymakers to ensure America’s security and prosperity by supporting interventions proven to help America’s youth succeed academically, stay physically fit, and abide by the law.

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# Young Virginians: Ready, Willing and Unable to Serve

## 75 percent of young adults cannot join the military; Early Education across Virginia is needed to ensure national security

The Pentagon reports that 75 percent of Americans aged 17 to 24 are ineligible to serve in our military. The reasons behind this are serious and - if left unaddressed - will adversely affect the strength of our military. In the interests of national security, we must understand and deal with these problems.

### Three Crucial Reasons Why Young Americans Cannot Join:

Although there may be multiple reasons why an individual is ineligible to serve in the military, three of the most significant reasons are inadequate education, a criminal background, or excess weight.

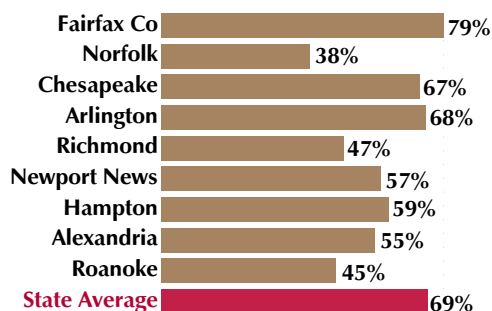
**Inadequate education:** Approximately one out of four young Americans lacks a high school diploma. Students who have received a general equivalency degree (GED) can sometimes receive a waiver if they score well enough on the military's entrance exam. However, most of those who dropped out and received a GED instead of a regular degree do not possess sufficient math or reading skills to qualify.

Virginia's high school dropout problem is alarming: statewide, more than 30 percent of ninth graders fail to graduate from high school within four years, according to one frequently cited analysis. In Virginia Beach and Norfolk, ninth graders graduate on time at a rate of just 65 percent and 38 percent, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

Not only are too many young people failing to graduate, many of those who do graduate still lack the academic skills necessary to take their place alongside others in the workforce or in the military.

The "Nation's Report Card," the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), reports that in 2007, 62 percent of Virginia's eighth graders scored below the proficiency level in math, and 66 percent scored below the proficiency level in reading.<sup>2</sup>

### LOW GRADUATION RATES FOR SELECTED SCHOOL DISTRICTS



2005-06 Graduation Rates  
Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2009

Even with a high school degree, many potential recruits still fail the Armed Forces Qualification Test (the AFQT) and cannot join. The test is used by the military to determine math and reading skills. About 30 percent of potential recruits with a high school degree take the test and fail it.<sup>3</sup>

**Criminality:** One in 10 young adults cannot join because they have at least one prior conviction for a felony or serious misdemeanor (and for five percent of young adults, trouble with the law is the only thing keeping them out).<sup>4</sup>

To illustrate how serious the crime problem is in Virginia, there were more than 300,000 arrests for crimes in Virginia in 2007 and more than 7,200 arrests for violent crimes.<sup>5</sup> According to The Pew

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*"One in 46 adults is under  
correctional control in Virginia."  
- Pew Center on the States*

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Center on the States, one in 46 adults is under correctional control in Virginia – in jail, in prison, or on probation or parole.<sup>6</sup> Juvenile crime is also a serious problem in the state, with over 39,000 juvenile arrests in Virginia in 2007.<sup>7</sup>

**Weight problems: 27 percent** of young Americans are too overweight to join the military.<sup>8</sup> Many are turned away by recruiters and others never even try to join, but of those who attempt to join, roughly 15,000 young potential recruits fail their entrance physicals every year because they are too heavy.<sup>9</sup>

Just as in the rest of the country, the percentage of Virginians who are not just overweight but actually obese has risen rapidly. The rates of obesity among American adults has more than doubled over the past four decades, with one in three adults being obese.<sup>10</sup> Virginia's weight problem is slightly worse than the nationwide average, with 31 percent of children ages 10-17 either overweight or obese.<sup>11</sup> So, the number of enlistment-age young adults who cannot join the military because of weight problems – currently 27 percent nationally – will almost surely continue to increase in the next few years.

**Additional reasons beyond those three:** Many young people are disqualified from serving for various health problems, such as asthma, eyesight or hearing problems, mental health issues, or recent treatment for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders.

Nearly a third (32 percent) of all young people have health problems - other than their weight -

that will keep them from serving. When weight problems are added in with the other health problems, over half of young adults cannot join because of health issues.<sup>12</sup>

Others are not eligible because they have drug or alcohol problems, are too tall, too short, or have other non-medical reasons making them ineligible. For example, single parents with custody of a child cannot join. The cut-off points for different service branches vary on many standards.

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*“Our men and women in uniform are the best in the world. But the sophistication of our military is increasing every year so we will soon need even better-qualified recruits. Unfortunately, the number of young Americans who have high-school degrees, are in good physical shape, and are without criminal records is declining. To keep our country strong and safe, we need to ensure all young Americans get the right start in life – we need more investments in high-quality early education.”*

**Henry “Hugh” Shelton General, US Army (Ret.) Former Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff**

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**Multiple problems:**

Solving one problem is often not enough to allow someone to join. For example, some of the overweight individuals are also involved in crime or have other medical problems that would disqualify them even if they were to lose enough weight.

**Fewer waivers in 2009**

**but...** During economic downturns, the military is better able to find well-qualified recruits and can temporarily rely less on

waivers for those with academic deficits or criminal records.<sup>13</sup> But a weak economy is no formula for a strong military. Once the economy begins to grow again, the challenge of finding enough high-quality recruits will return. Unless we help more young people get on the right track today, our future military readiness will be put at risk.

**In summary:** when all the requirements are considered, only about two out of 10 young people are fully eligible to join the Army without any waivers, according to the Army's Accessions



Command.<sup>14</sup> The number of others who are eligible with waivers depends on the service branch and where they draw the lines on waivers for educational deficits, legal offenses or health problems. In his March testimony, Curtis Gilroy, the Pentagon's accessions policy director, testified that currently **75 percent of young Americans have problems that will keep them from joining the military.**<sup>15</sup>

### **Quality early education increases graduation rates and cuts crime**

Future MISSION: READINESS reports will discuss health issues, but this report is focused on what can be done to increase graduation rates and cut crime. Over 40 years of research on early education programs has found they successfully address both problems.

### **Research shows early education builds a foundation for future learning**

Ninety percent of a person's adult brain weight is achieved by age five.<sup>16</sup> According to the Institute of Medicine book *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, brain scans and neuroscience have now shown conclusively that the best time to influence a child's trajectory in life is during the child's earliest years when the architecture of their brain is literally under construction. Changes in neurons, connections and structures in the brain continue throughout life, but the most important changes come during the 0-5 years:

What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows.<sup>17</sup>

And "school readiness skills" are more than just learning the ABC's or knowing how to count. Young

children also need to learn to share, wait their turn, follow directions, and build relationships. This is when children begin to develop a conscience – differentiating right from wrong – and when they start learning to stick with a task until it is completed. The Nobel-prize-winning economist James Heckman who studies economic productivity argues that these early social skills are crucial for future success in school and later in life. As Heckman explains, success builds on success. Unfortunately, failure also begets failure.<sup>18</sup>

### **The solid research behind early education**

Those who have served in leadership positions in the United States military recognize that it is imperative that the military be able to field not just highly competent individuals who can operate high-tech machinery and computer systems. The military also needs individuals who will have the ability to work in teams and the excellent judgment needed to successfully carry out their duties while deployed on active duty. That cannot be acquired just in basic training.

Carefully designed studies have followed children in high-quality early learning programs for decades. The resulting research has shown that children in the programs had higher rates of high school graduation and lower rates of arrest than the study participants who did not receive the preschool programs.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, of the many school reforms that can impact children's chances of graduating, early education has the most solid proof that it can raise graduation rates among those carefully implemented and studied.<sup>20</sup>

Evidence supporting pre-kindergarten for at-risk children came from a randomized-controlled study following children in the **High/Scope Perry Preschool Project** in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Beginning in 1962, preschool teachers worked intensively with low-income children ages 3 and 4. The children



attended preschool during the week and teachers came to their homes once a week to coach their parents on appropriate parenting skills. Researchers followed the children up to age 40, comparing their life experiences with the children who did not participate in the early education program. The contrast was stark.

Almost half of the preschool children were performing at grade level by the age of 14, compared with just 15 percent of the children in the control group; and 44 percent more of the children in the Perry program went on to graduate from high school.<sup>21</sup>

By age 27, at-risk three- and four-year-olds left out of the Perry Preschool program were five times more likely to be chronic offenders than similar children who attended the program. Significant and meaningful differences in life outcomes continued through age 40.<sup>22</sup>

The **Child-Parent Center (CPC)** pre-kindergarten program has served over 100,000 at-risk, inner-city children in Chicago. By the age of 18, children left out of the program were 70 percent more likely than program participants to have been arrested for a violent crime. An outstanding charge or conviction for a violent crime usually prevents a young person from enlisting in the military.<sup>23</sup> The children left out of the program were also almost twice as likely to be placed in foster care as those in the program.<sup>24</sup>

By age 20, participants in CPC were 29 percent more likely to have graduated from high school, and by age 24 were 11 percent more likely to have either attended college or to have been working steadily than those left out of the preschool program.<sup>25</sup>

**Evidence that beginning as early as possible is important**

The **Abecedarian** home visitation and preschool program randomly assigned children from

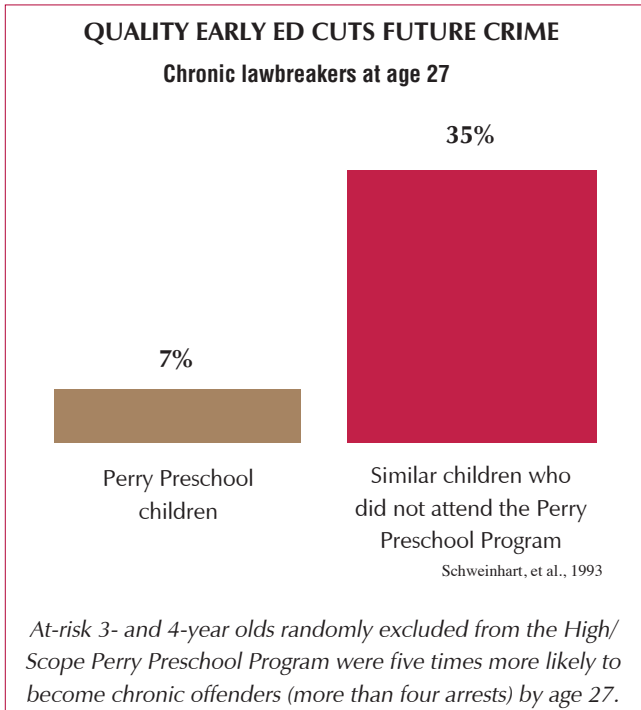
*“Quality early education increases graduation rates by as much as 44 percent.”*

**- Schweinhart, 2005**

impoverished families living in a small Southern town to either a full-day, enriched preschool program at a child center, or to no intervention. The children began in the program as infants (usually at 4 months) and continued receiving high-quality early education up to age five.

The children *not* in Abecedarian had lower IQ’s at age 12, were 91 percent more likely to be held back in school, and dropped out of high school 48 percent more often. The children served by Abecedarian were nearly three times more likely to be attending a 4-year college at age 21.<sup>26</sup>

The **Syracuse University Family Development Program** provided weekly home visits and high quality early learning programs to low-income, single-parent families beginning prenatally and lasting through age five. Ten years after the initial study ended, children who were not





*“Child-Parent Centers: At-risk children left out of quality early education were 70 percent more likely to commit violent crimes.”*

**– Reynolds, 2001**

included in the program were 10 times more likely to have committed a crime than comparable children enrolled in the program (16.7 percent versus 1.5 percent). Furthermore, children not in the program committed more serious crimes, including sexual abuse, robbery, and assault.<sup>27</sup>

These snapshots over time of the children’s development show that early childhood education and parent coaching can have significant long-term impacts on a person’s success or failure in school and beyond. Research shows that these interventions in the prenatal to five years have far-reaching consequences later in life, and all of society benefits.

### **A strong investment with impressive returns**

Not only does early education advance the educational success of students, it also produces solid savings to taxpayers. Disadvantaged children who repeatedly fail in school do not simply disappear. Too often these children grow up to have very troubled lives, and their struggles can be extremely costly to society. Special education, crime, welfare, and other costs account for staggering

*The United States military itself understands the inherent value of early education. The Army, Navy and Air Force have been providing high-quality early care and education to the children of personnel at bases around the globe for more than a decade, and the military’s Child Development Centers have been recognized for their path-breaking role in this area.<sup>28</sup>*

expenses for the nation’s taxpayers.

Individual children who grow up to drop out of school, abuse drugs and become career criminals cost society, on average, over 2.5 million dollars each.<sup>29</sup> There are well over two million criminals in American jails and prisons and over seven million currently in jail, in prison, or on probation or parole.<sup>30</sup> So, when a researcher added up all the quantifiable private and public costs, it was not all that surprising that criminal behavior alone was found to cost Americans \$1.7 trillion a year.<sup>31</sup>

Because the various costs to society incurred by some of the at-risk kids can be so high, research shows that the benefits of investing in high-quality early childhood education for at-risk kids far outweigh the costs. According to cost benefit studies done of the programs:

#### **Net Savings from Early Education Investments**

High/Scope Perry Preschool	\$244,811 <sup>32</sup>
Chicago Child-Parent Centers	\$70,977 <sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately, Virginia is still spending heavily on recurrent social problems and not enough on preventing them in the first place. For example, while the Chicago Child-Parent Centers have shown that high-quality early education and parent coaching can cut out-of-home placements almost in half, the Commonwealth and federal governments together are paying over \$277 million a year to identify and care for the victims of abuse or neglect in Virginia.<sup>34</sup>

### **Next steps for Virginia**

Virginia provides early education to its at-risk 4-year-olds through the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI). The Virginia Preschool Initiative began in 1994 under Governor George Allen with the goal of serving at-risk 4-year-olds. Four-year-olds become



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*“Individual children who grow up to drop out of school, abuse drugs and become career criminals cost society, on average, over 2.5 million dollars each.”*

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eligible for the program based on multiple risk factors, including living in poverty, homelessness, having parents with limited education, or having limited English proficiency. Funding is allocated to school districts and local social service departments, which then have the choice of providing services directly or sub-contracting. During the 2007-2008 school year, Virginia invested \$46 million in the Virginia Preschool Initiative, serving 13,125 at-risk 4-year-olds.<sup>35</sup> Local communities also contribute funds to match state investments in VPI; state and local investments combined totaled approximately \$75 million.

More than \$10 million was added in additional state money for the 2008-2009 year.<sup>36</sup> VPI now serves more than 15,000 children.<sup>37</sup> But, due to lack of funding, most of Virginia’s children do not receive either Head Start or state-funded pre-kindergarten. Virginia served only 20 percent of its 4-year-olds with Head Start or state-funded early education in 2008, and with no regular state pre-kindergarten program for 3-year-olds, it serves only five percent of its 3-year-olds through Head Start.<sup>38</sup> According to the National Institute for Early Education Research’s (NIEER) annual assessment of state early education programs, the 20 percent of 4-year-olds served in Virginia in 2008 is less than the percentages of children served in neighboring states: 37 percent in Maryland, and 43 percent in West Virginia. And by way of contrast, Oklahoma is now serving 87 percent of its 4-year-olds.<sup>39</sup>

In Virginia, funding for Head Start, the nation’s premier early education program for at-risk kids, is sufficient to serve an estimated 43 percent of all

Head Start-eligible children, and Early Head Start serves only an estimated three percent of infants and toddlers from low-income families who are eligible.<sup>40</sup>

As important as it is to increase access, it is also crucial to deliver high-quality programs. The research is clear that only high-quality programs deliver strong results. Military commanders all know that quantity is no substitute for quality – a strong military unit needs both.

Virginia does not meet three of the 10 benchmarks for quality programs set by NIEER. For example, Virginia does not require all its lead teachers in private programs to have Bachelor’s degrees, and its assistant teachers only need a high school diploma or GED; no training or certificate in early education is required.<sup>41</sup>

While there is still significant room for improvement for the Virginia Preschool Initiative, a report by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission showed that the at-risk children attending VPI are doing far better than would be predicted based on the education levels of their parents, their socio-economic backgrounds, language barriers and other challenges. Overall, they scored 13 percent better on entry into kindergarten than would be predicted based on their backgrounds. Hispanic children scored 41 percent better than predicted. The at-risk children attending VPI even outperformed the average children entering kindergarten, whatever their background. That is solid evidence that at-risk children are not destined to be left behind at the starting gate if they get the right start before entering school.<sup>42</sup>

Virginia is also in the process of implementing the Virginia Star Quality Initiative. It provides a consistent way for parents to distinguish the level of quality in private early education programs, allowing parents to make more informed choices. In



addition, early learning providers who participate in this completely voluntary program are provided with a way to continually improve the quality of their services. But more funding and effort is needed to ensure this reaches more providers and families.<sup>43</sup>

If state and federal investments in high-quality pre-kindergarten continue to grow, Virginia will be able to ensure that more children are starting life on a surer foundation for success. For example, with additional funding more children can be served earlier, and new programs based on solid research showing how to help troubled young children and their families can be included in existing programs. Virginia has a long history and strong recent efforts at beginning to meet the needs of its at-risk young children. But more effort is needed to fully reap the benefits of investing in Virginia's youngest children when relatively small efforts and investments can have such a big impact on children's later success in life, and on America's national security.

### **Conclusion: Early education is an investment in national security**

The best aircraft, ships, and satellite-guided weapon systems are only as effective as the personnel the military can recruit to operate them. Just as with our evolving economy, tomorrow's military will need young people who are better prepared than

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***“Our national security in the year 2030 is absolutely dependent upon what is going on in pre-kindergarten today.”***  
**- Admiral James Barnett, US Navy (ret.)**

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earlier generations for tomorrow's challenges. But the trends are not encouraging. Too many young people are dropping out of school, getting involved in crime, and are physically unfit.

This cannot continue. Our military readiness and thus our national security depends on the ability of the upcoming generation to serve. We need to take action now to reverse our current course.

If Members of Congress and state policymakers from Virginia act now to ramp up both the quantity and quality of pre-kindergarten programs, they can count on strong support from the retired generals and admirals of MISSION: READINESS. Additionally, MISSION: READINESS members call on federal and state policymakers to support increased investments in other evidence-based early education initiatives designed to enhance program quality and access.

We fully understand what is at stake. Virginia can, and must, do a better job of preparing our children for a successful life with many options in adulthood, including a career in the military if they choose to serve. Increased investments in high-quality early education are essential for our national security.

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