

### **\$400,000 grant aims to boost area childcare**

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Exposing newborns through 4-year-olds to effective childcare is an investment that affects children, families and - ultimately - a community, Charlottesville business and education leaders say.

A two-year, \$400,000 grant from the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation has committed local groups - whether banks, university departments or nonprofits - to ensuring that young children from all corners of the area are given quality care.

The Charlottesville area is one of four in the state to receive the grant, and foundation President Scott Hippert was impressed at how its proposal connected University of Virginia leaders with local businesses.

"That is absolutely critical to us in applying the grant because there has to be sustainability down the road," Hippert said.

By the age of 5, about 85 percent of the human brain is developed, according to the early childhood foundation, making it critical that young children are socialized to acquire language skills and are guided so they adopt learning habits before they enter kindergarten.

The spotlight statewide has focused recently on the issue of kindergarten readiness, as Gov. Timothy M. Kaine has been traveling the state and touting the benefits of his "Start Strong" pre-k plan, which he is slated to detail Thursday. The plan commits to allowing the

parents of all state 4-year-olds to choose to send them to public, private or faith-based preschools.

Critics of the plan question its reported \$300 million price tag.

The aim of the grant, meanwhile, is to have localities rewire and bulk up support for their early childcare cultures so that after the grant expires, a more effective system will have taken root for the long-term, Hippert said.

"The goal is to address the gaps in the system," said Jon Nafziger, vice president for the local United Way. Nafziger wrote the grant for the Charlottesville/Albemarle Partnership for Children - a group comprised of 15 local agencies.

Through the grant, area educators and nonprofits will work to form a rating system that evaluates area preschools and childcare centers. One full-time and two part-time mentors experienced in childcare will visit the centers to determine how attentive they are to the children and how they communicate a child's strengths and weaknesses to parents.

As local parents research preschools for their children, they will be able to use the rating system to determine the quality of the childcare provider, said Kathy Flanders, Child Care Quality Program Manager for Children, Youth and Family Services Inc. An evaluation from an outsider will also motivate providers to improve their staffs and quality of care, Flanders said.

She and CYFS will oversee the execution of the rating system. Flanders noted that it will help eliminate the notion that a pricier private preschool means better quality.

“Tuition does not guarantee quality,” Flanders said. “And having low-income kids does not necessarily imply that there’s low quality. It all depends on the interaction between the provider and the child.”

The grant also funds a family liaison for Johnson Elementary’s preschool program in the city, as well as home-visiting services for families in Albemarle’s Greer and Woodbrook elementary districts.

Robert Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education at UVa, will also lead a group that will manage the collection of data and anecdotes that track the effectiveness of the two-year program.

In this way, the grant will act as a model that can be used by other areas of the state once results are seen.

“We want to knit together a program that caters to all kids in the community,” Pianta said.

Involving local businesses is an essential ingredient for this cohesion, said Mark Giles, chairman of the board of Virginia National Bank in Charlottesville.

“If you have the private sector saying that a program like this is important, it ends up making a statement,” Giles said. “We’re coming into an era where public-private partnerships are going to be more important.”

Virginia National Bank, the law firm Williams Mullen, and the local branches of State Farm Insurance and Bank of America are business partners in the grant and will provide financial backing for the project.

“In a lot of communities, a lot of people care about their own interests and don’t sit down at the same table,” said Kim Connolly, marketing and communications director for the United Way-Thomas Jefferson Area. “It’s something that this community does really well.”