

smart  
beginnings

ALEXANDRIA

# Our Common Agenda

Ready for School. Ready for Life.



A Proud Partner of the Virginia  
Smart Beginnings Network



# Our Story

## Challenge and Opportunity

Alexandria is a beautiful, diverse, and prosperous city with tree-lined neighborhoods, historic cobblestone streets, and waterfront homes. But opportunities and experiences that promote prosperity do not extend equally to all residents. Consequently, throughout this small city, families and their children are living in poverty. Many face challenges such as food insecurity, lack of affordable housing, and no access to healthcare and childcare. In fact, more than one in three children in the City of Alexandria live in households considered low income (US county and State Quick facts 2017). This puts many Alexandria children at risk of not succeeding in school and beyond.

Young children growing up in poverty are more likely to enter kindergarten already behind, which puts them at risk of falling further behind in school — and in life (Brookings). Sadly, in Virginia only 44.5% of economically disadvantaged children meet the state benchmarks as being ready for kindergarten and in Alexandria only 37.85% of economically disadvantaged children meet the benchmarks (state report). The need to support our youngest Alexandrians is clear, the challenge is real. According to James Heckman, Nobel Prize-winning economist, “Every dollar spent on high-quality, birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children delivers a 13% per annum return on investment.” Investments made to systemically align and ensure access to high-quality early childhood education make sense, are the right thing to do and are the sole focus of Smart Beginnings Alexandria (SBA).



## Smart Beginnings Alexandria and Our Common Agenda

In 2014, the City Council adopted a Children and Youth Master Plan (CYMP) that addressed the needs of Alexandria's children in a more holistic manner, attempted to break down silos, and promoted children and youth success. Recognizing the challenges facing many young children in Alexandria, that plan called for a strategy to "support the development and alignment of, and access to, a high-quality early care and education system that prepares young children to enter kindergarten."

Rather than many organizations working on their own toward this goal, the time had come for key system entities that surround children — i.e. professionals, community members, and families — to work collectively toward a coordinated and synergistic system. SBA, formerly the Early Care and Education Workgroup, was launched as the coordinating body to ensure access to an aligned system of high-quality early care and education services so that **all children are academically, physically, socially and emotionally ready to enter and succeed in kindergarten and beyond.**

SBA is committed to promoting system collaboration and alignment, equitable access to high quality programming, comprehensive service provision, data-driven decision making, and a laser focus on achieving universal school readiness. While SBA as an entity does not provide direct service to children, its membership comprises the many organizations that do. Collectively the members of SBA determine the strategic framework using best-practice information and based on input from professionals, community members, and families.

In 2015, SBA worked with the international consulting firm FSG to organize as a collective impact model and to develop the first strategy document, known as the Common Agenda 2015, which delineated a plan for a strengthened and aligned early care and education system. The first five years of implementation laid the foundation for a strong cross sector partnership focused on system alignment. This document, the Common Agenda 2020, represents the updated version of the Common Agenda 2015. While much work has been accomplished, a great deal more needs to be done. SBA is well positioned to continue moving the work forward using the Common Agenda 2020 as a guide.



## SBA's Impact and Future Work

The following chart delineates a few examples of what SBA has accomplished since becoming an early childhood collective, plus some highlights of the Common Agenda 2020.

Notable Conditions Prior to SBA Collective	Common Agenda 2015 Accomplishments	Common Agenda 2020 Highlights
Work of agencies siloed and coordination sporadic. No formal structure for cross agency representation, financial contribution, backbone support, nor collective voice for advocacy.	SBA established as a cross sector agency - Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the city, schools, and community foundation including financial contributions and backbone coordinating structure.	Establish longer term plan for sustainable backbone support. Solidify use of best metrics for decision making.
Programs used a variety of curricula and measures. Professional development was siloed and based on the ability of each organization to pay and organize.	Common curriculum being used. Shared professional development among programs. Council set up to determine coordinated professional development. Best in class trainers engaged.	Include Family Day Homes in professional development. Align professional development to classroom observation and child outcomes.
No single document explaining to parents the preschool options. Each program had its own enrollment forms, requirements, and waitlists.	Preschool brochure available in four languages showing all options. Shared enrollment form. Enrollment coordination between programs. Greater understanding of demand and waitlist.	Expand access to child development information and resources to families of birth-3-year-olds. Pilot new means of reaching all families.
Alexandria's loosely coordinated early childhood providers coordinated individually with the city and the state.	Eligible for and received approximately \$700K in grants for professional development and program expansion through city and state grants and private funding. Part of state ECE leadership network.	Seek funding to pilot and expand new programs. Adapt and expand child outcome data in coordination with the city, schools, and state.

# Our Vision, Mission, and Guiding Principles

## Vision

All of Alexandria's children  
and youth succeed today  
and tomorrow

## Mission

Every child in Alexandria has a  
strong start in life and in school

In order to realize this mission, SBA is building an early care and education system that is:

**Aligned:** We celebrate Alexandria's mixed delivery system, which is intentionally organized to provide a variety of services based on the diverse needs of children and families

**Accessible:** Programming is designed to be accessible to all, and especially for the most vulnerable, and is centered around what is optimal for children and families

**High-Quality:** Alexandria's children are entitled to a high-quality, culturally competent learning experience that is in line with local, state, and national guidelines, and research and evidence-based, data-driven practices

**Comprehensive:** The ECE system spans prenatal through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, including educational, health, socio-emotional, family, and community support

**Equitable:** Every child and family deserves high-quality services that eliminate disparities in life opportunities

Our work is guided by a set of **principles** that underpin the way we work together collectively:

**Children and families are at the heart of everything we do.** Together, we are building a system of care that is family and child-centric.

**This is a community-wide effort.** We need to actively engage parents, community members, voters, funders, and other partners through a unified voice.

**Everyone values and respects each other's contributions.** We embrace the fact that we are a mixed delivery system and actively seek to have different perspectives at the table.





**Commitment to results is crucial.** If we arrange our puzzle pieces more effectively and share a commitment to accountability, we can create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

# Our Strategic Framework

The goal of SBA is to create a community where all **children** are academically, physically, socially, and emotionally ready to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. To do this, SBA has identified four focus areas to frame our work: **System Alignment, Access, Family Connections, and Quality**. Additionally, the **Backbone** fulfills essential ongoing functions related to sustaining both the work and the infrastructure needed to support our efforts. While the focus areas are a consistent element of the strategic framework, specific strategies, projects, and outcomes are reviewed and updated annually to reflect current priorities based on community needs. The current focus areas and strategies are detailed below.



## Examples of Current and Evolving Projects

	Current Projects	Evolving Projects
<b>System Alignment</b> 	<p>Develop a data system and data sharing agreements with key partners to capture how children are being served by and benefiting from the early care and education system.</p>	<p>Implement a longitudinal data tracking system to track children as they move to and through the early care and education system.</p> <p>Better understand the gaps and opportunities related to existing funding streams and capacity, including how to better combine and optimize funding for a more equitable, sustainable, and family and child-centric system.</p>
<b>Access</b> 	<p>Complete a preschool space audit for program continuity and/or expansion opportunities.</p> <p>Create an annual preschool delivery strategy and optimize funding streams supporting it.</p> <p>Continue to refine enrollment processes to enable families to have a more transparent understanding of their eligibility for various programs.</p>	<p>Develop a coordinated enrollment process with one point of entry.</p>
<b>Family Connections</b> 	<p>Develop stronger feedback mechanisms for families to engage with providers in a culturally and geographically accessible way.</p> <p>Ensure stronger transitions between pre-K and grades K-3, with greater information sharing across early learning pathways.</p>	<p>The Basics Awareness Campaign</p> <p>Forge connections among health and education providers, particularly in the prenatal to 3-year-old space, in order to identify specific ways SBA can support comprehensive prenatal care, a comprehensive medical home approach, and more referral conduits between health-focused and other programs.</p>
<b>Quality</b> 	<p>Increase the number of childcare centers, preschools, and family childcare homes that are accredited, maintaining accreditation status annually, and/or participating in the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).</p>	<p>Develop a professional learning continuum that is based on provider professional goals, licensure requirements, and observational data.</p>





# Measuring Our Progress

SBA has organized itself using a “collective impact” approach to developing an early care and education system. Collective impact “occurs when organizations from different sectors agree to solve a specific social problem using a Common Agenda, aligning their efforts, and using common measures of success”. SBA is working in a complex and fluid environment where priorities and issues relating to child success are often overlapping and dynamic. SBA’s measurement framework organizes data so that it is useful as an ongoing learning tool and

that prioritizes data and information that is relevant and can be tracked. Some data points are collected to inform context and future work and may not be directly related to a current strategy.

SBA’s theory of change details how our work will help move the needle for SBA, the ECE system, and ultimately, for children.

**Box 1** focuses on capturing contextual factors that shape and influence our work but are not factors the initiative itself is seeking to change. **Box 2** captures the development and implementation of SBA as an effective collective body. **Box 3** is focused on how SBA’s collective work is creating positive change in the system that supports young children. Finally, **Box 4** is intended to capture the extent to which the ultimate outcomes for children are improving.



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## Understanding our **community context**...



- **Demographics** in Alexandria today and trends over time.
- **Socio-economic conditions** and other **economic factors**.
- **Magnitude of needs** amongst the ECE population.

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...and how we'll work together as a collective system...



### **System Alignment**

- Alexandria's ECE system has a shared vision for change and is working together towards that vision
- Alexandria's ECE system constantly reflects on how to do things better and builds off each other's work
- Alexandria has dedicated, sustainable, resources to support its early care and education work
- An established data system continually tracks progress and fosters ongoing collaboration

### **Backbone**

- There is dedicated staff that provides leadership, support, and project management

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...to impact critical elements of the ECE system...



### **Access**

- Programs and services have sufficient capacity to serve all of Alexandria's vulnerable children
- Programs and services are organized by children and families' needs rather than by income level
- Programs and services are geographically matched to the needs of children and families
- Providers and professionals act as a resource and referral to other relevant providers or families



### **Family Connections**

- Families understand the importance of holistic child development
- Families have better knowledge of and access to available early care and education resources
- Families are actively voicing needs to providers, SBA, and other stakeholders as appropriate



### **Quality**

- Educators have the expertise, curricula, resources, and tools needed to provide high-quality instruction that is both culturally and linguistically responsive
- Educators focus on and provide individualized services to children and families with the greatest need

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...which will lead to **better outcomes for our children**.



### **Health**

- Increased participation in prenatal care
- Healthier birth weights
- More medical homes
- More immunizations
- Healthier Body Mass Index (BMI)

### **Academic**

- More pre-K experience
- Increased kindergarten readiness in reading and math
- Increased 3rd grade proficiency in reading and math
- Fewer English Language Learners requiring services upon kindergarten entry
- Increased developmental screenings

### **Social-Emotional**

- Increased kindergarten readiness in socio-emotional domains
- Better self-regulation
- Better knowledge of self

# Our Organizational Structure

The efforts of SBA are carried out by a collective of individuals and organizations working collaboratively to provide oversight and project management.

**Work Group** – Serves as the decision-making body for the early care and education systems effort. The collective perspective represented by the Work Group is designed to guide the effort, determine strategic priorities, and lead the work needed to achieve systems change.

**Steering Committee** – Provides strategic direction related to goals and activities, acts as a nominating committee to the Work Group, vets funding opportunities, and provides guidance and support to the Backbone.

**Backbone** – Fulfills essential ongoing functions related to coordinating, monitoring, and sustaining both the work and the infrastructure needed to support the efforts.

## Work Group Members

**Jennifer Ayers**, Executive Director, ALIVE!

**Kara Blankner**, Philanthropic Advisor, Frank and Betty Wright Foundation

**Deborah Bowers**, Public Health Nurse Manager, Alexandria Health Department

**Dr. Poornima Chandra**, Pediatrician, Neighborhood Health

**Debra Collins**, Deputy City Manager, City of Alexandria

**Robin Crawley**, Chief, Early Childhood Division, City of Alexandria

**Jackie Hortsmann Didio**, Executive Director, The Child and Family Network Centers

**Jim Epstein**, Board of Trustees, Frank and Betty Wright Foundation

**Ellen Kennedy Folts**, CEO, Bruhn-Morris Family Foundation\*

**Kate Garvey**, Director, Department of Community and Human Services, City of Alexandria\*

**Dr. Stephen Haering**, Director, Alexandria Health Department

**Dr. Stacy Hardy-Chandler**, Director, Center for Children and Families, City of Alexandria

**J. Glenn Hopkins**, President and CEO, Hopkins House

**Michelle Smith Howard**, Executive Director, Smart Beginnings Alexandria\*

**Dr. Gregory Hutchings**, Superintendent, Alexandria City Public Schools\*

**Dr. Tammy Mann**, President and CEO, The Campagna Center\*

**Sean McEneaney**, Past Chair, Children, Youth & Families Collaborative Commission

**Lori Morris**, President, Bruhn-Morris Family Foundation\*

**Dr. Terri Mozingo**, Chief Academic Officer, Alexandria City Public Schools\*

**Clint Page**, Chief Accountability Officer, Alexandria City Public Schools

**Nancy Pedulla**, Director, Healthy Families Program, Northern Virginia Family Services

**Giselle Pelaez**, Executive Director, The Center for Alexandria's Children

**Jane Richardson**, Early Childhood Special Education Coordinator, Alexandria City Public Schools

**Diane Smalley**, Director, Creative Play School

**Heidi Haggerty Wagner**, Principal, Alexandria City Public Schools

**Brandi Yee**, Chief Program Officer, ACT for Alexandria

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