November 9, 2019

# Ensuring Equity in Early Childhood Education

**Media Contact:** Sara Hunt | SaraHuntPR@gmail.com | 804-994-1120

More than 100 early childhood leaders from across the Commonwealth gathered in Richmond on Nov. 6-7 for the Smart Beginnings Meeting, coordinated by the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation.

The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation fosters Smart Beginnings initiatives to ensure that communities across Virginia have capacity to support the good health and school readiness of young children from birth to age five. Throughout the two-day event, participants explored strategies to ensure equitable access to quality early childhood services and experiences for all children in their respective communities.

Sessions included a discussion on analyzing and using available data to better understand the disparities that exist in early childhood, led by Vanessa Walker Harris, Director of the Virginia Department of Health's Office of Family Health Services and Jenna Conway, Chief School Readiness Officer for the Virginia Department of Education.

Other highlights of Day One included a collaborative idea-sharing session with community teams, a wrap-up reflection by Maurice Jones, former Virginia Secretary of Commerce and current CEO of Local Initiatives Support Corporation, and a dinner keynote address by Afira DeVries, Director of Spring Impact, a global nonprofit focused on helping organizations expand their social impact through scalable solutions.

Day Two began with a panel of Richmond-area leaders, Dr. Danny Avula and Reggie Gordon, who reviewed the challenges and potential of their work to bring health and economic opportunity to Richmond residents. Dr. Avula is the Public Health Director for Richmond City and Henrico County. Reggie Gordon is the Deputy CAO of Human Services for Richmond City. Following this session was a panel of parents who shared their own perspectives and experiences on accessing available resources that support families with young children.

Later, a panel discussed how the Commonwealth of Virginia addresses and tackles disparities and equity in early childhood education at the state level. Moderated by Chidi Uche, Advisor on Childhood Trauma and Resiliency within Virginia's Secretariat of Health and Human Resources, the panelists included Monica Smith-Callahan, Assistant Superintendent at the Virginia Department of Education; Lauren Powell, Director of the Virginia Department of Health's Office of Health Equity; and Dr. Janice Underwood, the Governor's Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

The event concluded with several interactive sessions for Smart Beginnings teams, which included parents from their communities, designed to help participants develop action plans that could be implemented within their respective communities.

"The annual meeting provided an opportunity for Smart Beginnings teams to explore equity-related issues that have a profound impact on school readiness at the local level," said Kathy Glazer, President of the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation. "We were honored to host a diverse lineup of speakers and local partners including

parents who generously shared their insights and experiences. Together, we are striving to improve and transform Virginia's early childhood development systems to provide equitable access and opportunity so all children can thrive."

To request a full agenda of the annual meeting, contact info@vecf.org.