

2024 Mixed Delivery Evaluation Report: Executive Summary

The Mixed Delivery program is a publicly-funded initiative that offers high quality full-day, year-round early childhood care and education (ECCE) services for children birth to five through licensed non-school-based and non-faith-based private and community programs, such as child care centers, preschools, and family day homes. Originally **envisioned as a “sister” program to the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) to address under-enrollment challenges from programmatic limitations of VPI, Mixed Delivery is intended to provide at-risk families with high quality ECCE services for children birth to five in the settings of their choice so that parents can work and children can enter kindergarten ready to learn.**

The Mixed Delivery program began in 2016 as an innovative pilot envisioned by the Virginia General Assembly and the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) and has continued to evolve each year since. Its ongoing commitment is to help Virginia increase access to high quality, affordable ECCE services in settings, formats, and schedules that work for Virginia’s families in low-income and otherwise at-risk households. The key purposes behind Mixed Delivery innovations are to:

- ◆ **Increase families’ access to their choice of affordable, high quality child care** by improving the fiscal stability and sustainability of private/community-based ECCE sites.
- ◆ **Improve quality of instruction and retention of talented staff** by empowering ECCE site leaders with the resources to competitively compensate educators.
- ◆ **Support families’ employment success and self-sufficiency** by increasing the number of eligible children served in ECCE settings that meet families’ needs and preferences.
- ◆ **Build children’s school readiness** by providing *high quality* ECCE services—meaning those that incorporate use of an approved curriculum, high-quality teacher-child interactions, and developmental assessments of preschoolers—that prepare children for success in kindergarten and beyond.

Because of challenges endemic to the childcare sector, these purposes are neither simple to address nor achieve and require strategies that go beyond business as usual. To achieve these purposes, the Mixed Delivery program tests innovative, problem-solving strategies, including:

- ◆ **Cost-of-quality methodology** for setting service rates that ensure quality and improve ECCE site sustainability and therefore access for families.
- ◆ **Annual contract** (vs. voucher) method based on enrollment not attendance to provide more predictable and sustained funding for Mixed Delivery sites.
- ◆ Requirement of **minimum contract size and substantive portion** in Mixed Delivery classrooms to ensure the needed density of funding to incentivize quality improvements, including competitive compensation and retention for ECCE educators.
- ◆ Provision of **ECCE services for infants and toddlers** that help to address the sizable gap between supply and family demand.
- ◆ **Ready Regions¹ statewide coordination** to identify ECCE sites; support participation in the Virginia Quality Birth to Five system (VQB5), Virginia’s ECCE quality measurement and improvement system; and engage families in designing and creating community-driven systems of services that address their needs and preferences.

¹ <https://vecf.org/ready-regions/>

Findings and Recommendations

This report provides detailed findings from an in-depth evaluative analysis of the Mixed Delivery program administered by VECF in Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23).² **This report also indicates relevant program design changes already implemented in FY24 per VECF's commitment to innovation and continuous quality improvement.** A combination of document review and surveys, interviews, and focus groups conducted by the Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver were used to explore the following research questions:

1. Does the Mixed Delivery program increase access to high-quality ECCE services that meet family needs and preferences?

This evaluation found that Mixed Delivery increased access to ECCE services, particularly for children from low-income families, and that these services met most family needs and preferences. However, the supply of publicly-funded ECCE services remains insufficient to meet parental demand, with most sites reporting a waiting list and requests for slots for the FY24 program year far surpassing available funding.

2. How does ECCE site participation in Mixed Delivery impact the quality of ECCE services?

Mixed Delivery site leaders reported that participation in Mixed Delivery supported their financial stability, making it possible for them to increase investments in quality improvements, including teacher compensation, and to retain teaching staff. Despite modest increases in teacher compensation and benefits, ECCE pay rates for lead teachers remain low.

3. How can we understand Mixed Delivery's impact on children's school readiness?

VECF has worked with state partners to align data systems and build the capacity for the Mixed Delivery program to monitor, measure, and support school readiness for participating children. Mechanisms for understanding school readiness include administration of child-level assessment for preschoolers, engagement in VQB5 and LinkB5, further development of the VECF Mixed Delivery Data Portal, and assigning State Testing Identifiers for children enrolled in Mixed Delivery.

Based on the evaluation findings, this report makes the following recommendations for future refinement of the Mixed Delivery program to benefit families and children across the Commonwealth:

- 1. ACCESS:** Continue to monitor enrollment relative to Mixed Delivery's geographic footprint to ensure equitable access to Mixed Delivery services.
- 2. QUALITY:** Develop plans to build high-quality ECCE services based on information about gaps in enrollment.
- 3. STABILITY:** Support ECCE sites' capacities and capabilities for budgeting and managing their operations.
- 4. EFFECTIVE FINANCING:** Increase funding for greater access to Mixed Delivery services and continue funding Mixed Delivery at 100% of the cost of quality.
- 5. ACCOUNTABILITY:** Identify additional opportunities to improve data systems and reporting to close information gaps.

² FY23 covers the term of July 1, 2022, through June 30, 2023. References to dates by FY throughout the report consistently reflect this July 1 – June 30 term.