



# NO TIME TO WASTE: INDICATORS OF SCHOOL READINESS PALS-K

## What is PALS?

The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), developed by the University of Virginia, is the screening tool of the Virginia's Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI), and is used by 98% of school districts in Virginia on a voluntary basis. The Initiative was "initially established by the 1997 Virginia Acts of Assembly to help participating school districts identify kindergarten and first grade children in need of additional instruction and provide early intervention services to those students with diagnosed needs in reading."<sup>i</sup> It was expanded in March 2000 to include students in grades K-3.

Both the PALS-K and the PALS 1-3 measure young children's knowledge of important literacy fundamentals, including phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, knowledge of letter sounds, spelling, concepts of words, word recognition in isolation, and oral passage reading. The major purpose of PALS is to identify those students who are below grade-level expectations in these areas and may be in need of additional reading instruction through the EIRI.<sup>ii</sup>

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## What Do PALS-K Scores in Virginia Tell Us?

- Although PALS scores address only literacy fundamentals, they are an important indicator of school readiness and the overall quality of the early care and education a child has received.

## Are Children in Virginia Ready for Kindergarten?

- In the fall 2002, of the 74,666 kindergartners in Virginia screened with the PALS-K, one in five (15,194) were identified as needing additional instruction.<sup>iii</sup>

## What Does It Mean to be *Ready* for Kindergarten?

- A child's first five years provide the foundation upon which subsequent educational efforts are built. This foundation is multi-faceted, including the physical, social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic skills that children need to succeed. Substantial and meaningful development in all of these areas is important for a child's success in kindergarten and beyond.
- The child who has poor vision, who has difficulty interacting with other children, who lacks self-control necessary for a structured environment or who has had little exposure to colors, letters or counting skills will have more difficulty in kindergarten than a child who does not have these challenges.

## Children Who Enter School Behind Their Peers Are Unlikely to Ever Catch Up.<sup>iv</sup>

- Researchers have found that as many as 80% of the children who enter school significantly behind their peers encounter negative outcomes such as failing the third grade reading test, disruptive behavior in school, dropping out of school, involvement in criminal activity or teen pregnancy.

## How Do We Improve a Child's Readiness for School?

- Quality programs that combine intensive family support and early education services have been found to be most effective in reducing anti-social behavior and delinquency.<sup>v</sup>
- At-risk children who participate in quality early care and education programs are less likely to be held back a grade, spend less time in special education, and more likely to graduate high school, which is known to lead to higher earnings than for those who do not graduate.<sup>vi</sup>
- Key features of high quality programs include low child to staff ratios, limited group size and highly educated teachers.

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## Virginia's Public Preschools

The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) and Head Start are publicly funded preschools dedicated to serving at-risk four year olds. VPI is supported with state and local funds, and Head Start is funded with federal funds.

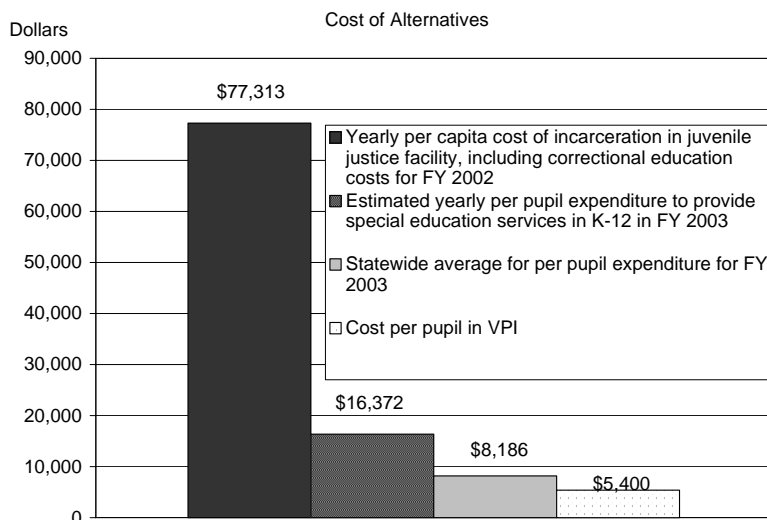
- There were an estimated 22,967 *at-risk* (as determined by family income) 4 year olds in Virginia. This represents 23% of the projected total number of all 4 year olds during 2003-04.<sup>vii</sup>
- Legislative policy changes in 2004 established Virginia's commitment to serve 100% of the at-risk four year olds unserved by Head Start.
- In 2004-05, 78% (n. 90) of the eligible localities participated in VPI. Twenty-two localities were not eligible to participate.<sup>viii</sup>

### What Are the Costs of Inaction?

Children who are unprepared for kindergarten are more likely to experience academic and social difficulties, difficulties that may be addressed in the public schools or the juvenile justice system at costs higher than those for preschool.

*We can pay now or we will pay more later.*

Figure 1<sup>ix</sup>



- There were 11,692 Virginia children in grades K-3 who were not promoted in the 2002-03 school year. Since it is likely that most of these children were retained, Virginia school systems spent approximately \$95.7 million (at a cost of \$8,186 per child) for those children to repeat that grade.<sup>x</sup>

### Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup> PALS Website, Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia (December 2, 2004).

<http://pals.virginia.edu/Technical-Information/Background.asp>

<sup>ii</sup> Id.

<sup>iii</sup> Although participation in the Early Intervention Reading Initiative is voluntary, 130 of the 132 divisions chose to offer the additional instruction in 2002-2003.

<sup>iv</sup> J. Shonkoff & D. Phillips, (eds.), (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, D. C.: National Academy Press

<sup>v</sup> Id.

<sup>vi</sup> Richard E. Behrman, M.D., (ed.) (1995). *The Future of Children, Long-Term Outcomes of Early Childhood Programs*. Los Altos, CA: The David and Lucile Packard Fdn.

<sup>vii</sup> Office of the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, Commonwealth of Virginia (2004). *No Time to Waste: Indicators of School Readiness. 2004 Data Book*.

<sup>viii</sup> Virginia Department of Education (2004). *Legislative Briefing. Va. Preschool Initiative for At-Risk Four Year Olds*.

<sup>ix</sup> Incarceration data: Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice. Available online on 12/02/2004 at <http://www.djj.state.va.us/about/DJJ-Statistics-FY2002.pdf>. Special

education: Virginia Department of Education (2002). *Comparison of Statewide Expenditures on Special Education vs. Non-Special Education Students*. Available online on 12/02/04 at

[http://141.104.22.210/VDOE/Instruction/Sped/compare\\_expend.pdf](http://141.104.22.210/VDOE/Instruction/Sped/compare_expend.pdf) - Since

only 2000-01 data were available, special education costs were estimated based on 4 year trends in which special education costs were at least 50% more than non-special education costs. Average

expenditures per pupil: Virginia Department of Education (2003). *Table 15 of the Superintendent's Annual Report for Virginia*. Available online on 12/02/04 at

<http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Publications/asrstat/2002-03/Table15.pdf>. VPI costs: Virginia

Department of Education (2004). *Fiscal Year 2005 - Estimated Cost of the At-Risk Four-Year-Old Program*.

<sup>x</sup> Virginia Department of Education (2004). *Promotion Data*.

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