



*Commonwealth of Virginia
Office of the Governor*

Executive Order

Number Eleven (2018)

The Way Ahead for Virginia's Children: Establishing the Children's Cabinet

Importance of the Initiative

Virginia has a distinguished record as one of the best states for children and families. This national recognition is the result of substantial investments in education, health care, public safety, and a vibrant business environment that promotes job growth, employment opportunities, and career advancement.

However, complex challenges still exist for children in Virginia. Current research shows a child's environment and experiences from 0-5 years old have a dramatic influence on brain development and, ultimately, school readiness. One-third of Virginia kindergartners may not be fully ready for school and lack the appropriate social, self-regulation, literacy, or math skills based on a recent Joint Legislative Audit Review study. Nearly 500,000 children in Virginia do not have access to fresh or healthy food. Children who are food-insecure are in poorer health and are more likely to be developmentally at-risk than their peers. Finally, at least 19% of children in Virginia have endured two or more adverse childhood experiences: traumatic events linked to risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, low life potential, and early death.

These particular challenges require collaboration from a wide range of state and local agencies, like education, health, human services, public safety, and the courts. In order to improve children's services in these areas, we need leaders at the highest levels of state government to direct and prioritize the resources and activities that will have the greatest impact on improving the lives of our children.

Establishment of the Cabinet

Accordingly, by virtue of the authority vested in me as Governor under Article V of the Constitution of Virginia and under the laws of the Commonwealth, and subject to my continuing and ultimate authority and responsibility to act in such matters, I hereby establish Virginia's Children's Cabinet ('Children's Cabinet').

Children's Cabinet

The Children's Cabinet shall work to develop a set of goals, identify strategies, and measure impact and outcomes related to the priorities described below. It shall encourage state agencies to collaborate across government and non-governmental entities on collective goals and support efforts to collect and share data to track outcome metrics and inform future policy. In addition, it shall evaluate and recommend ways to optimize and align local, state, and federal resources, and public-private partnerships to enhance current and prospective programs and services for Virginia's children and their families, particularly those at higher risk. It shall also identify best practices and areas for improvement.

Children's Cabinet Priorities

A. Early Childhood Development and School Readiness

A child's early experiences are lifelong determinants of health and well-being. Current research shows that the years from birth to school age are critically important for brain development. Many of the risks for the diseases of adult life are, in part shaped by learning, coping, and decision-making skills that are set in the earliest years. These skills determine whether children will be successful in school and, ultimately, in life.

In recognition of the scientific importance of these early years, the Children's Cabinet will encourage state agencies involved in providing health and education services to children and families to leverage new and current strategies to achieve the following goals:

1. Promote healthy pregnancies and social supports to new mothers and families for the first few years of a child's life

Healthy pregnancies are the foundation of a strong start for children. In 2014, one out of eleven babies was born pre-term in Virginia. The Commonwealth ranks 14th in the nation in terms of premature births. In order to provide a strong start for all children, we must ensure access to quality and affordable prenatal care, and education about maternal health and nutrition. The need for health care, education, and social supports does not end at birth. We must expand family support programs that teach safe sleep practices and parenting skills to promote healthy child development, implement policies that support women in breastfeeding, and strengthen economic supports to families.

2. Ensure that early childhood education is affordable, accessible, and of high quality everywhere in the Commonwealth

The path to success in school begins before a child enters the classroom. Families, communities, and schools play critical roles in helping children prepare for school. Because two out of three Virginia children live in families in which all parents work, we must work to build a durable, innovative, and effective early

childhood system in Virginia. The Children’s Cabinet will evaluate whether our current structure governing early childhood education and services promotes collaboration and efficiency, explore ways to make high quality early childhood education more accessible and affordable, and make recommendations for building a strong early childhood educator workforce.

B. Nutrition and Food Security

Children who do not have sufficient food do not perform well in school and are more likely to suffer from physical and mental health issues. Food insecurity among children is associated with lower math and reading scores in kindergarten through third grade, a higher likelihood of repeating a grade, behavioral problems, higher hospitalization rates, and higher rates of chronic health conditions. Similarly, pregnant women who are food-insecure are at higher risk of miscarriages, birth defects, and premature birth. The Children’s Cabinet will explore whether state agencies governing agriculture and food nutrition programs can leverage new and current strategies to achieve the following goals:

1. Expand access to nutritious food and decrease food insecurity for pregnant women

It is essential that women have access to nutritious food before, during, and after pregnancy. The Children’s Cabinet shall strategize ways to increase nutrition and food security for pregnant and post-partum women, especially low-income women. This includes, but is not limited to, increasing utilization of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) among eligible families.

2. Expand access to nutritious food and decrease food insecurity for children

Childhood nutrition and food security is key to healthy childhood development. The Children’s Cabinet will support the work of state agencies to, among other strategies, expand access to school breakfast and meals after school, support innovation in summer meal programs, and streamline eligibility for free meals.

3. Promote community-based food systems to increase access to healthy, local foods

It is critical for Virginians, especially children, to have access to nutritious, affordable, and locally-sourced foods to enable them to thrive, learn, and succeed. The Children’s Cabinet will encourage the development of innovative models to provide increased access to healthy foods focusing on areas classified as food deserts. These strategies include, but are not limited to, promoting urban agriculture initiatives, farmer’s markets, farm to school, and local food systems to encourage a diversifying Virginia agricultural economy.

C. Systems of Care and Safety for School-Aged Youth

Virginia’s children are increasingly experiencing a complex set of environmental, health, and public safety related challenges that affect their ability to develop into thriving young adults. It is estimated that at least one in five of Virginia’s children exhibit symptoms of

mental health disorders and 19% of children in Virginia have experienced two or more adverse childhood experiences. Additionally, Virginia's annual school safety audit indicates that half of all threats reported to K-12 threat assessment teams involve threats of harm to self. Unfortunately, fewer than half of our youth receive the care they need. Because our youth spend a substantial amount of time in schools, we must equip the professionals who regularly interface with them to recognize and intervene as soon as concerning behaviors appear. Recognizing the need to support the health and safety of children, the Children's Cabinet will leverage strategies to achieve the following goals:

1. Develop recommendations to enhance student safety

Virginia is a national leader in school safety and has a consistent record of adopting innovative legislation, such as mandated threat assessments in K-12 schools and annual school safety audits, and implementing robust training programs for school personnel and school resource officers. We must continue to adapt and respond to new and emerging challenges affecting the safety of our communities, schools, and children. Our work must be grounded in the concept that trusting relationships between adults and youth are the foundation to ensuring the safety of our students. The Children's Cabinet will assemble school personnel, public safety officials, mental health professionals, and other community partners to make recommendations to the Governor by October 1, 2018. These recommendations will include enhancing information sharing and effectiveness of threat assessments teams; assessing the role, prevalence, and training of school resource and school security officers; evaluating existing ratios and staffing levels for school support staff; and identifying opportunities to expand training to a variety of personnel.

2. Support a consistent, evidence-based, and culturally-competent statewide response to childhood trauma

Adverse childhood experiences are serious childhood traumas that result in toxic stress and harm a child's brain and development. These traumas have a tremendous impact on future victimization, and lifelong health and opportunity. The Children's Cabinet will seek to coordinate efforts across state agencies, with external stakeholders and local communities to foster systems that provide a consistent trauma-informed response to children with adverse childhood experiences and build resiliency of individuals and communities.

Composition of the Children's Cabinet

The First Lady of the Commonwealth of Virginia will chair the Children's Cabinet. The remaining members of the Children's Cabinet will be appointed by the Governor, including the Lieutenant Governor and the Secretaries of Agriculture and Forestry, Education, Health and Human Resources, and Public Safety and Homeland Security. The Chair may invite other secretaries to participate as needed and appropriate.

Staffing

Staff support for the Children’s Cabinet will be provided by the secretariats and offices represented in the cabinet. The Children’s Cabinet will serve in an advisory role, in accordance with § 2.2-2100 of the *Code of Virginia*, and will meet upon the call of the Chair at least four times per year. The Children’s Cabinet will issue an annual report by no later than May 1, 2019, and any additional reports and recommendations as necessary or requested by the Governor.

Effective Date of the Executive Order

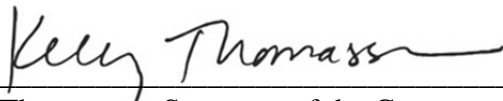
This Executive Order shall be effective for one year after its signing.

Given under my hand and under the Seal of the Commonwealth of Virginia, this 21st day of June, 2018.




Ralph S. Northam, Governor

Attest:


Kelly Thomasson, Secretary of the Commonwealth