



VISION TO IMPACT

Improving Early
Childhood Care and
Education for Young
Children in Richmond

ROBINS
FOUNDATION

 SCHOOL
READINESS
CONSULTING

A BIG OPPORTUNITY IN THE EARLY YEARS

Investing in the first few years of life can make all the difference.

Robins Foundation recognizes that investments in early care and education have the power to change the trajectory of a child's life. When our youngest children are supported during the early years, it can set the foundation for all future health, learning, and well-being. This support can lead to positive lifelong outcomes, such as greater academic success, higher earnings, lower participation in social service programs, and lower chances of involvement with the criminal justice system. The benefits linked to high-quality early childhood programs also extend beyond children and can contribute to building stronger families and a more robust workforce, as well as delivering significant returns to the larger society.ⁱ Understanding this, the Foundation is committed to deeply investing in early childhood for children (from birth through 5 years old) in the Richmond, Virginia community as a promise to build a brighter future for all.

Now is the time to revisit and refresh the Foundation's investment strategy.

The early childhood landscape has seen many changes over the last few years. This has been in part due to the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the historic unification of the state early childhood agency, specific goals for early childhood identified in Virginia's updated strategic plan, and the transition to a new quality rating and improvement system, VQB5.ⁱⁱ These considerable changes have resulted in shifts in early childhood policy and practice that have been felt in local communities across the state, including in the Richmond area. The Foundation has identified this as a vital moment to step back and reflect upon its grantmaking in the current context. In response to the current landscape, the Foundation is considering how their strategy might be revised to ensure it best meets the needs of their grantees and the broader Richmond community. This consideration also includes exploring opportunities to monitor impact through a new evaluation approach that aligns with the refined strategy. Overall, Robins Foundation is seeking to examine its investments in early childhood to align with the rapidly changing field and maximize the opportunities that support Richmond's young children and their families in having what they need to succeed.



OUR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACH

Core to the work of Robins Foundation is a strong commitment to community.

The Foundation is dedicated to uplifting the voices and needs of its grantees and partners. This includes careful listening, continual learning, and a focus on collaboration in order to be both effective and impactful. Centering this commitment as a core value, Robins Foundation engaged [School Readiness Consulting](#) to facilitate a community-driven approach to revise their investment strategy. This approach included:



Focus groups and interviews with 48 early childhood leaders

representing grantees, funders, content experts, agency leaders, and other partners. These conversations provided a comprehensive picture of the strengths and needs of the Virginia early childhood community from those closest to the work. Insights gathered pointed to important opportunities to maximize the impact of the Foundation's grantmaking in the region and improve the outcomes of young children and families.



Early childhood landscape scan of over 50 key documents

to identify proven practices in philanthropy, as well as high-impact opportunities for private investment in the early childhood space. This analysis also included a review of resources on current issues and changes impacting the early childhood community in the Richmond area, as well as the broader early childhood system in Virginia.



Review of 100 key internal documents

to build a strong understanding of Robins Foundation's early childhood portfolio and grantmaking approach, as well as the activities of grantees. The document review helped to gain a clearer picture of the local funding environment, and the unique role that the Foundation has played with its grantmaking.



Multiple reflection sessions with the Foundation

to iterate, share thinking, and make decisions on updates to the investment strategy. The Foundation's Early Childhood Team alongside the Board met at key junctures to offer timely ideas, feedback, and guidance throughout the revising effort.

As a result of this inclusive process, several key themes emerged as important considerations for Robins Foundation — and even for others seeking to be a catalyst for change on behalf of Richmond's early childhood community.

KEY THEMES FOR IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

1 Current areas of investment are still relevant and needed to support the early childhood system.

Overall, the funding areas reflected in the Foundation’s current investment strategy remain priorities for the local early childhood community. That is – supports for family engagement, high-quality programs, workforce supports, and policy and advocacy remain vital to those doing the work. The value and need of those focus areas were reinforced both by conversations held with grantees and through a review of changes seen across the Virginia early childhood landscape. At the same time, opportunities were identified where private funds could be further refined and targeted to maximize resources, contribute to both short- and long-term change, and also lead to important benefits for the field more broadly. For example, some of the more pressing needs and priorities shared were:

- Expand access to more evidence-based programs and services to engage families in ways that center their strengths and needs, particularly for multilingual families in Richmond
- Strengthen available resources to enhance quality, coordinate efforts, and build capacity of early learning programs
- Increase support for professionals to be fully prepared, supported, and compensated as they enter into and remain in the early childhood workforce
- Align messaging and advocacy to advance public investment and well-designed policies driving the early childhood field

ON FUNDING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

I think [family engagement] campaigns need to come organically from the populations who are going to be impacted rather than some packaged campaign.

– Informant

ON FUNDING HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAMS

I think Robins [Foundation] or an organization like that has a little bit more capacity or potential to see the alignment opportunities and help bridge that for us... where we're so busy in the work that we don't have time to go find the "who can play with us and do it better" stuff. We just keep plodding.

– Grantee

ON FUNDING **WORKFORCE SUPPORTS**

The workforce piece is really a crucial part of all of this, bringing folks into the field and making sure that they're prepared. I think a lot of people come into this field because they love children, but there's a lot more to it than that. And it takes time and money to train folks [to get] where they need to be.

– Informant

ON FUNDING **POLICY & ADVOCACY**

*It can't just be slots that we invest in... undergirding that is the **engagement and awareness to understand why early childhood matters so that community members can advocate with their elected officials** for these pieces to come into action at the local and state level.*

– Informant

2 There is potential to further leverage the role of early childhood philanthropic leaders.

The philanthropic sector is well positioned to communicate the value of high-quality early childhood programs and supports by highlighting research, proven practices, and lessons learned from their grantmaking with other funders, systems leaders, and decision makers in the broader field. This points to important opportunities for funders to come together to increase collaboration and focused investment to tackle larger issues facing the early childhood sector. Robins Foundation is seen as a strategic thought leader in the early childhood philanthropic space. Grantees and partners described the Foundation as “systems champions,” “connectors,” “gap-fillers,” “innovators,” and “sustainers.” This highlights the opportunity that exists to lean further into this role. Through convening, thought partnership, and other strategies, the Foundation may be able to support greater collaboration among funders and the larger early childhood community in the Richmond region.

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“I just think **Robins has been a sustainer. They're the backbone that allows you to get more innovative and creative** because you can lean into that support, know they care and they're gonna be behind it. **That's been a huge stabilizing thing for us.**”

– Grantee

“

The hiring of Meg has been a force multiplier for us... she's a go-to person for me to talk to about these issues. So, simply staffing up and positioning themselves to be subject matter experts is an asset to us.

– Informant

3 Opportunities exist to continue strengthening internal grantmaking practices.

How grantees are selected and awarded funding matters as much as the resources they are provided. A growing interest in relationship-based philanthropy has prompted many foundations to re-examine their grantmaking strategies and embrace new methods of giving that ultimately reduce grantee burden and center communities. The landscape scan for this effort showed how Robins Foundation provided resources to support general operating costs during the pandemic to be more responsive to emerging needs, and grantees reiterated the importance of continuing to offer resources accompanied by this greater flexibility and reliability. Therefore, it is an opportune time for private foundations, including Robins Foundation, to explore innovation and co-creation with its grantees. There is value in pursuing ongoing efforts to reflect on grantmaking approaches to ensure the Foundation remains responsive to community needs and evolving directions of the early childhood field.



“Multi-year funding helps with staffing and helps organizations really build a sustainability plan and budget. And you can’t have that sense of security and build your budget with funding that only happens within a year.”

– Grantee

4 Significant benefits may come from using a relationship-based approach to track progress and measure impact.

Evaluation can give organizations insight into how to best align their efforts to the needs of communities. For philanthropic organizations, this translates into a refined ability to track resources, evaluate the impact of investments, and adjust their strategic approach based on the information collected.ⁱⁱⁱ In this way, evaluations provide data-driven insights into what is working and what is not. Much of the evaluation field has been dominated by a top-down approach to gathering and analyzing data that emphasizes quantitative metrics and short-term outcomes.^{iv} This approach can limit learning for funders as they miss

the opportunity to understand and therefore support the bigger picture of the change organizations and communities are working toward and the challenges they are facing. Grantees and other key informants alike emphasized these points:

- **Creation of realistic timelines for measuring impact.** Focus group participants discussed the reality that true systems change takes time and the outcomes they seek are often long-term results. To that end, there are important considerations for how to meaningfully measure progress and impact of grant funds over time.
- **Reduce the burden on grantees by leveraging existing data sources.** Grantees recounted stories of the challenges with collecting data and not having the capacity “to take on another task.” Informants also expressed awareness of the added burden reporting can place on grantees and offered solutions that included working with grantees to leverage existing data sources to measure progress.
- **Importance and power of stories to demonstrate progress.** Grantees stressed the importance of qualitative data and the use of narratives to show progress, appreciating the opportunity that oral reporting gives for relationship building among funders and grantees. Grantees expressed excitement about sharing their work with funders in ways beyond statistics and numbers.
- **Opportunity to build grantee capacity for evaluation.** Grantees emphasized the importance of evaluation to their work as well. While there is a strong desire to measure programmatic impact among grantees, the lack of infrastructure presents a barrier for many who are left unsure of where to start. Informants stressed this as well, aware that any request for data must be accompanied with resources to support its collection to ensure every grantee will be able to contribute fully.

As Robins Foundation looks to measure progress in more effective and innovative ways, there is a clear opportunity to move beyond current practices. Adopting a relationship-based approach to evaluation has been proven to help foundations better understand their impact, while fostering commitment and deepening relationships between funders and grantees.



“If Robins values data, then **they also need to value data infrastructure** and investing in building that within organizations... that we can’t expect every single nonprofit or for-profit provider to have the infrastructure to collect the data that we want to see.”

– **Informant**



“**I think a lot of us don’t have evaluation skill sets or a lot of capacity.** So, we don’t always know the right things to ask to get to the real meat of an effective answer. But **we also don’t have the time** to dedicate the staffing to get it even if we knew what to ask.”

– **Grantee**

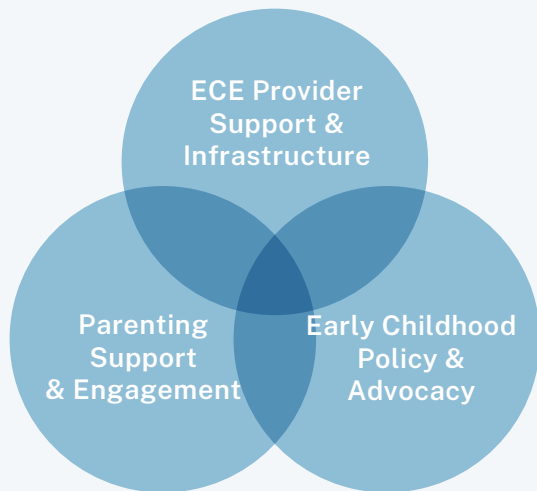
LOOKING FORWARD

Now is the time.

By investing in the early years, we can create the conditions where every child has a strong start and is set on a path toward lifelong success. Robins Foundation is poised to play a significant role in engaging leaders and communities around their vision and helping to inform the effective implementation of early childhood services and supports in the Richmond region. The key themes from this effort offer a clear set of considerations as the Foundation takes an important next step in revising their approaches (see Figures 1 and 2). With a refresh of their early childhood investment strategy, Robins Foundation can strategically double down on its efforts to shape a brighter future for Virginia’s children. The great opportunity that exists to create robust learning experiences for all Richmond’s young learners cannot be ignored, and the impact could last a lifetime.

FIGURE 1

CURRENT INVESTMENT STRATEGY



REVISED INVESTMENT STRATEGY

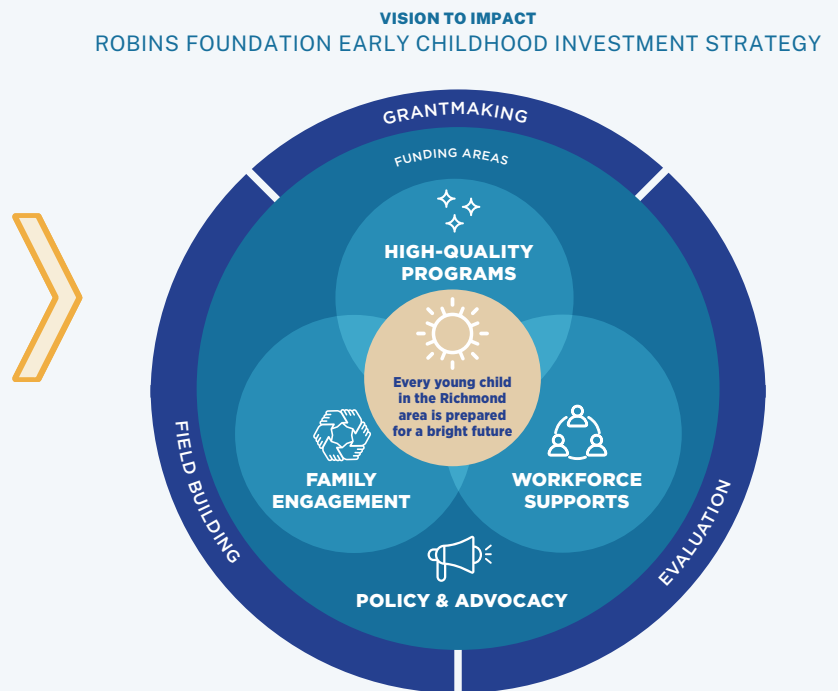
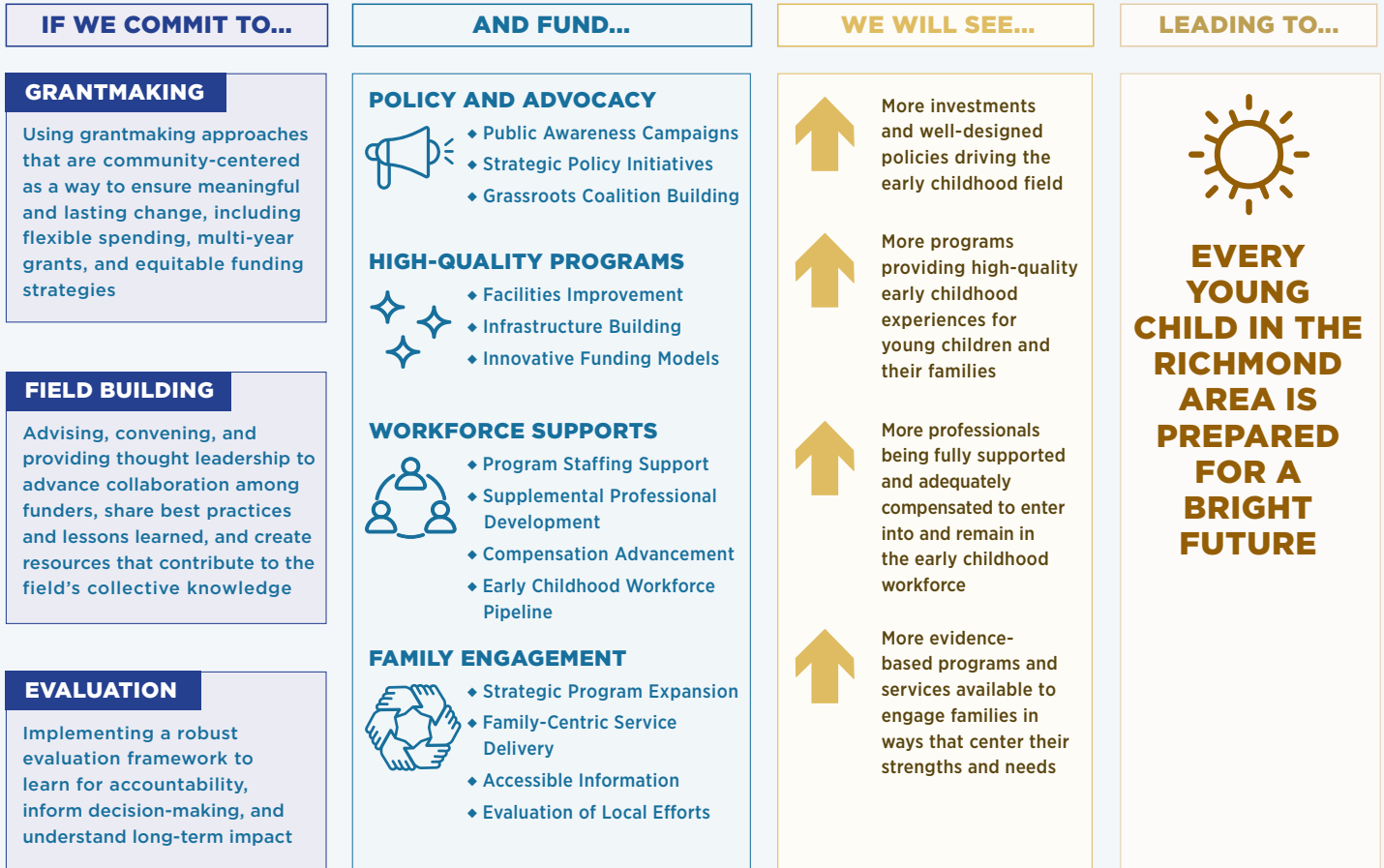


FIGURE 2

VISION TO IMPACT ROBINS FOUNDATION EARLY CHILDHOOD INVESTMENT STRATEGY



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SRC also appreciates the Virginia grantees and partners who shared their ideas and perspectives with us through focus groups, interviews, and reflection sessions. We are grateful for their willingness to share their experiences and expertise through conversations that contributed key insights and ultimately informed our suggested revisions to Robins Foundation’s early childhood investment strategy.

About School Readiness Consulting

This brief was prepared by [School Readiness Consulting \(SRC\)](#). As a consulting firm focused exclusively on birth through third grade, SRC partners to develop and implement strategies that improve outcomes for children in school and life. SRC believes that improving early childhood and affirming the right for all children to thrive represents the greatest opportunity to create a just society.

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