



Investing in School Readiness

Paving the Way to Kindergarten

Building Neighborhood Partnerships to Support
Young Children's Smooth Transition to School

Dear Colleagues:

As federal, state and local governments work alongside the private sector to identify creative ways to maximize limited resources, there is widespread agreement that investing in young children yields a terrific return.

Ensuring young children's kindergarten readiness increases the prospects for their continued success in school. Therefore, it is critical that we connect the dots between those who care for, educate and support young children to ensure that they and their families have the support they need to begin school well prepared to succeed.

Here in Fairfax, we have the tools in place to support children's academic and later workforce success – an award-winning school system, forward-thinking state and local governments and the creativity and economic strength of the private sector that, combined with the expertise and commitment of educators and other advocates, can ensure that our young students are on the path to success.

We are delighted to see the Neighborhood School Readiness Collaborative bring together preschool programs, schools and community partners in support of young children's smooth transition to school. This model partnership was launched with state, corporate and philanthropic dollars and is an effort that we hope can be brought to scale to help all young children in our county enter kindergarten ready to succeed.

Fairfax County's long-term economic strength and fiscal sustainability will depend on the skills, agility and flexibility of the future workforce. Today's youngest students will need to develop the critical thinking, team-building and problem-solving skills to reinforce the math, science, reading and technical skills that will be needed to help business remain competitive in the global marketplace. Through the creation of relationships at the neighborhood level supporting school readiness, we can help ensure that tomorrow's workforce will be ready to tackle the many challenges and opportunities that are just around the corner.

Because when young children enter kindergarten well prepared for success, everyone wins.

Sincerely,



Gerald E. Connolly
Chairman
Fairfax County
Board of Supervisors



Charlene Wheelless
Chair
Fairfax Futures
VP, Raytheon IIS



Jack Dale
Superintendent
Fairfax County
Public Schools

Introduction

Starting School! These two words bring to mind a vivid image of young children heading off to kindergarten – an image filled with family pride and the hopes and anticipation of a new beginning. This community planning guide was developed to assist preschool programs and elementary schools in joining together with families to support children’s smooth passage to kindergarten and to make this image a reality for all children.

Transition is an important component of school readiness. When all programs work together to facilitate children’s transitions and include families as partners in the process, children experience less stress and are more likely to show progress more quickly in the new setting.¹

Paving the Way to Kindergarten incorporates lessons learned from Fairfax County’s School Readiness Collaborative, a project launched in 2006 through a Virginia Early Childhood Partnership grant to provide information, resources and support to early childhood educators and parents to help children enter school ready to succeed.

In its pilot phase, the project partners — Fairfax County Office for Children (OFC), Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), Northern Virginia Community College, Fairfax County Head Start, and

Fairfax Futures — brought together four local elementary schools (Annandale Terrace, Freedom Hill, Hollin Meadows, and Lake Anne) and neighborhood preschool* programs to work together to engage parents as active partners and build a common understanding of school readiness.

Each of the four communities established a Neighborhood School Readiness Team to develop joint planning efforts so that children and their families would experience smooth transitions to kindergarten. Examples of good practice garnered from the work of the Neighborhood School Readiness Teams are featured throughout this guide as *Transition Tips*.

Attached as an appendix to this guide is a resource called Transition to Kindergarten:

Community Calendar. This calendar was created through a collaboration of community representatives, Fairfax County Office for Children staff and Office of Preschool to 6 Instruction and Library Information Services (OPSILIS) staff within Fairfax County Public Schools as a resource for schools and the community to use in support of smooth family and child transitions that promote student success. The calendar is replete with suggestions to help educators and other community leaders build the relationships needed to support children’s smooth transition to school. The strategies and activities shared can be adapted to accommodate the distinctiveness of neighborhoods, preschools and schools.

This guide and the community calendar are being shared to encourage other neighborhoods across Fairfax County to build teams to support children’s smooth transition to kindergarten.

The development of this guide and the expansion of this project to four additional elementary school neighborhoods in the Fall of 2008 (Centre Ridge, Hybla Valley, Lynbrook, Providence) is made possible through a generous grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation to Fairfax Futures.

¹Brown, G. (2005). *Terrific Transitions: Ensuring Continuity of Services for Children and Their Families*. SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. <http://www.serve.org/TT/tt1f.pdf>

* NOTE: The term *preschool* is used in the broadest sense to represent all early childhood settings children may participate in prior to entry into kindergarten, including child care centers and family child care homes.

Paving the Way to Kindergarten

Building Neighborhood Partnerships to Support Young Children's Smooth Transition to School

School readiness describes the capabilities of children, their families, schools and communities that will best promote student success in kindergarten and beyond. Each component – children, families, school and communities – plays an essential role in the development of school readiness. No one component can stand on its own.²

Children's readiness for success in school is enhanced when families, schools and communities partner together, long before a child enters the kindergarten classroom. This partnership is pivotal, since the foundations for learning, healthy social and emotional development, and how children relate to and interact with their world are shaped during the early childhood years.

Young children's development is intricately linked and dependent upon their relationships and experiences in many different settings – with their family, in preschool, school, and the broader community. When reliable connections are developed between these settings, children can journey to and from each environment buoyed by an effective system designed to meet their unique developmental needs. *These connections are the essence of kindergarten transition planning and help pave the way to kindergarten and sustained success in school and life.*



²Virginia's Definition of School Readiness, January 31, 2008. School Readiness Task Force Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives. http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/Virginia_Definition_of_School_Readiness.doc

Creating Smooth Transitions to Support Children's Success in School



“Across economic levels, all families of all children want to know that their children will fit in – academically, socially, and emotionally. They want to know – Do you care about my child?”

Anita Blain, Principal
Wolf Trap Elementary School

Successful transition initiatives can have important benefits for children such as increased motivation and openness to new experiences, enhanced self-confidence, improved relationships with other children and adults, and a greater sense of trust between teachers and children.³ When children are curious, self-confident, and excited about learning, they have greater opportunity for school success.

Families have the most important role in a young child's life, and are an integral part of the kindergarten transition process and essential partners in their children's education. Transition research recommends that schools take a proactive approach to involving and engaging families prior to the start of school and suggest that schools base transition practices on three interrelated principles:⁴

1. *Reach out* to link with families and early childhood settings.
2. *Reach backward in time* to establish links before the first day of school.
3. *Reach with appropriate intensity* to develop a range of practices and contacts.

Opportunities for families to have direct contact with schools and teachers prior to kindergarten entry are an important component of transition planning. Outreach efforts must consider where the children are and how to connect to their families. A community-wide approach may include the involvement of preschool programs, libraries, faith-based organizations, health, housing and family service agencies, and local businesses in information sharing and outreach to families of young children.

Preschool programs have a great deal of contact with families and can help

³Head Start Information and Publication Center (HSIPC). Easing the Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten: A Guide for Early Childhood Teachers and Administrators. Washington, DC: HSIPC

⁴Pianta, R.C., Rimm-Kaufman, S.E., & Cox, M.J. (1999). Introduction: An ecological approach to kindergarten transition. *The Transition to Kindergarten*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing

share resources on school readiness and information about kindergarten transition. Quality preschool programs promote and nurture children's sense of wonder and joy in discovery and learning that sets the stage for future

success in school. Preschool teachers and family child care providers conduct transition learning experiences with children as part of their daily curriculum. Offering transition practices year-round to provide an

TRANSITION TIP:

There are many ways to increase the number and intensity of the connections with families and to support their active involvement. Transition planners provide a range of options so families can choose the type and level of participation that best meet their needs, comfort level, and schedules. The more kindergarten and preschool programs work together, the easier children's transition will be.

Examples include:

- The principal of Hollin Meadows Elementary School personally calls families of rising kindergarten children to welcome them and invite them to participate in a special program that helps build a sense of belonging to the school.
- Lake Anne Elementary School conducts an Open House for rising kindergarteners and their parents in April and an additional Open House is held closer to when school begins. Kindergarten teachers provide tours of the classrooms; translators are provided for families as needed. An evening orientation for new families is held the first week of school to answer questions that families and community members may have.
- The principal at Annandale Terrace Elementary School invites incoming families to join families of current students for weekly information meetings held at the school.



“Our transition efforts have resulted in our teachers and parents now having a relationship with the school. We can work as a group with the parent, and help them to think through how to make it all work for their child.”

*Courtney Park, Director,
Laurel Learning Center
Lake Anne Neighborhood School
Readiness Team*



exchange of information and activities creates continuity as children move to kindergarten.

Kindergarten teachers receive children with a variety of early childhood

experiences. They can effectively support children’s smooth transition by developing connections with preschool programs and families before children arrive at their kindergarten door.

Guiding Principles for Successful Transitions

Transition is not a singular event but a process that occurs over time. Successful transitions are the shared responsibility of many individuals and institutions recognizing the dynamic nature of the relationships between children, family, schools and community.

Successful Transitions:

- **Foster Relationships as Resources:** Supportive, effective relationships are resources for children. When a child is involved in and surrounded by supportive relationships, the transition to kindergarten occurs more smoothly.
- **Promote Continuity from Preschool to Kindergarten:** Fundamental to a smooth transition are relationships that serve as a bridge between the family and school and provide continuity from preschool and kindergarten.

- **Focus on Family Strengths:** Relationships between schools and families, reflecting the strengths of families can be developed through supportive positive interactions.
- **Tailor Practices to Individual Needs:** The actual set of transition practices enacted with a given family or classroom must be based on the needs and strengths of that child, family, teacher, school and community.
- **Form Collaborative Relationships:** Collaboration among the key players in the transition process is fundamental in developing and implementing successful transition practices.

Partnering with Key Stakeholders

Parents, preschools and schools are natural allies and have many common goals. When elementary schools, parents, and preschools partner to promote continuity and a smooth transition to kindergarten, they are building the supportive community-wide foundation needed for children to succeed in school and beyond.

Preschool programs provide the foundation for children to develop self-confidence and a passion for learning

so that they can face new challenges and are equipped to solve problems as they move into a more complex world.

Elementary schools open their doors to engage children in a more formal learning environment and continue to support children on a path to achieve their full potential.

Together, they can extend outreach into the community to build new relationships and convene a Neighborhood School Readiness Team.



Building a Neighborhood School Readiness Team

“It has been invaluable meeting all who care for and help prepare young children for success in kindergarten. We are a school readiness “learning community,” united in our commitment to children’s learning. We added an orientation for new families – new to the school and/or community, and our attendance was significantly greater than in previous outreach efforts.”

*Linda Hajj, Principal
Lake Anne Elementary*

Creating connections to develop a shared vision for school readiness and to implement a transition to kindergarten requires focused effort and leadership. Transitions work best when strong relationships and effective partnerships linking children, families, schools, and early childhood programs are established before kindergarten starts. All partners contribute their strengths and resources and work together as a team to ease the transition between home, preschool, and elementary school and to ultimately support the healthy social and emotional development and educational achievement of the children.

Based on experience to date, successful teams reflect the following essential elements:

- ✓ Leadership and encouragement of school principals
- ✓ Commitment to shared goals by all stakeholders
- ✓ Active engagement of preschool programs
- ✓ Shared understanding of the importance of quality early learning experiences
- ✓ Connection with families
- ✓ Ready access to community resources and support

TRANSITION TIP:

Neighborhood School Readiness Team members may include:

- Elementary School Principal
- Family Child Care Providers
- Parent Liaison
- Parent Resource Teacher
- Preschool Directors
- Kindergarten Teachers
- Healthy Families Supervisor
- Preschool Teachers

The frequency of Neighborhood School Readiness Team meetings and where meetings are held impacts the ability of all stakeholders to fully participate. On average, Teams met at the elementary school or a preschool program every 8 weeks for 1-1½ hours, with some opting to meet as often as once a month while others have chosen to meet less frequently.

TRANSITION TIPS:

Effective transitions support continuity between programs.

- Preschool teachers and family child care providers visit elementary schools to learn about the environment, daily routines, and expectations of the kindergarten program.
- Kindergarten teachers visit the preschool program to learn about the environment, daily routines and experiences of children preparing to enter kindergarten.
- Children and families have opportunities to visit the neighborhood elementary school individually or as a group during the year before school entry. The visit(s) may include an introduction to kindergarten teachers, a school tour, and lunch in the cafeteria.
- Preschool programs work with families to share information with the kindergarten teacher that conveys children's strengths, experiences, and learning styles so that the program can build on the previous accomplishments of the children and provide appropriate supports.



"We greatly value the important work that the early childhood community does each day. Our Team meetings help to strengthen our engagement, understanding and mutual respect."

*Tim Stanley, Principal
Freedom Hill Elementary*



Developing Communication Strategies

“It is important for [family child care] providers to have information about school readiness to improve our programs. We can go with families to tour the school so that the children can see that it is not very different and they are not afraid.”

*Carolina Suarez,
Family Child Care Provider
Annandale Terrace
School Readiness Team*

Effective communication is critical for successful partnerships to build relationships, create understanding, and strengthen connections.⁶ Communication is enhanced when Neighborhood School Readiness Team partners are familiar and comfortable with each other and develop relationships based on a clear understanding of the important roles that each has in the transition process. The flow of information and cooperation between

members of the Team is ongoing and multi-directional. Preschools and schools can increase educational program continuity by sharing information about their programs, standards, and expectations. In planning together with families, they can ensure that everyone who works with and cares about the children can support them in their entry to kindergarten and this pivotal phase of their development.

TRANSITION TIP:

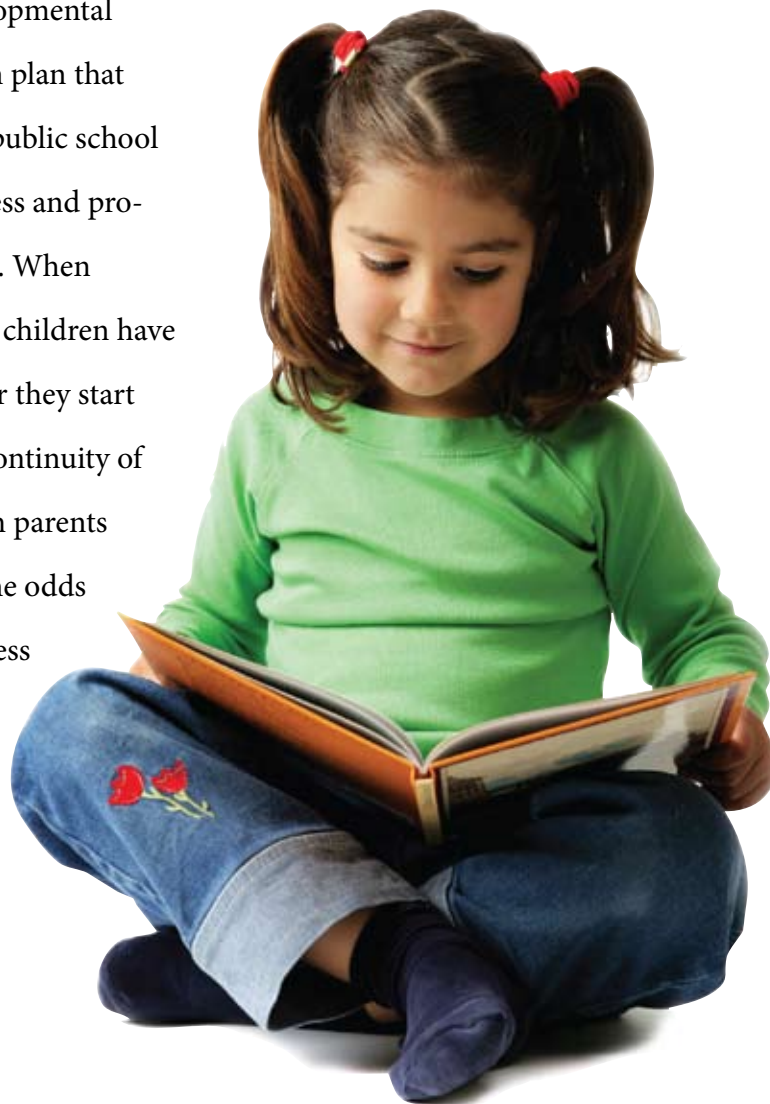
Neighborhood School Readiness Teams utilize a variety of strategies to share information and resources and to connect with all partners and programs. Examples include:

- Reciprocal visits to kindergarten classrooms and preschool settings
- Sharing newsletters and other announcements (print and electronic)
- Participating in parent information meetings and family events
- Providing information about community resources (i.e., Libraries, School Age Child Care programs, Child Care Assistance and Referral services, Healthy Families)
- Planning joint activities
- Attending community forums on early childhood education issues
- Developing new resources and tools to support the transition process
- Giving presentations/sharing expertise on topics that support best school readiness practices (i.e., emerging literacy)

⁶Brown, G. (2003). What it takes to Support School Readiness: Building Collaborative Partnerships. North Carolina Partnership for Children. Raleigh, NC

Conclusion

Transition to kindergarten is a significant developmental milestone. An effective kindergarten transition plan that helps pave a smooth path to the beginning of public school education is an essential component of school readiness and provides benefits for children, families, and communities. When communities unite to focus on this important period, children have the best opportunities to be successful before and after they start school. Creating community relationships, assuring continuity of support for children and families, and partnering with parents during the early years and early grades can increase the odds that children will experience early and sustained success in school and beyond.



Additional Transition Resources

Publications

Bernstein, N., Javier, C., & Justis, C. (2006). *Preschool to Kindergarten: A Planning Guide for School Readiness*. Williamsburg, VA: Child Development Resources, Inc. http://www.cdr.org/files/t_manual.pdf

Bohan-Baker, M., & Little, P.M.D., (2004). *The Transition to Kindergarten: A Review of Current Research and Promising Practices to Involve Families*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education: Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Pianta, R. C., & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2003). *Successful Kindergarten Transition Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families, and Schools*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing

Pianta, R. C., Cox, M. J., & Snow, K. L. (2007). *School Readiness and the Transition to Kindergarten in the Era of Accountability*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Rous, B., & Hallam, R. (2006). *Tools for transition in early childhood: A step-by-Step guide for agencies, teachers, & families*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing

National Initiatives

Terrific Transitions: Supporting Children's Transition to Kindergarten
A collaborative effort of the SERVE Regional Educational Laboratory and the National Head Start Association, this website provides a variety of transition information and resources for families, professionals, and community partnerships to use as they address children's transitions into kindergarten. <http://www.terrifictransitions.org>

SPARK – Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids, an initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation is designed to unite communities to create coordinated systems and smooth transitions so that all children can be successful both before and after they enter school. The SPARK initiative includes grantees in the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Ohio. <http://www.wkkf.org/spark/>

Examples of Transition Materials from Around the Country

Transition to Kindergarten Manual, Oregon Department of Education, Office of Student Learning & Partnerships, provides schools and districts with materials for implementing a kindergarten transition planning process for young children and their families from all backgrounds of early learning and care environments. <http://www.ode.state.or.us/superintendent/priorities/ready4school/transtokindmanual.doc>

Ready Set Go: A Journey to Kindergarten Calendar, North Carolina http://www.smartstart-nc.org/docs/TransCalendar_Final_Hires.pdf

Putting It All Together: Transition to Kindergarten Community Calendar

Transition Activity	Who's Involved/Community Resources
To be completed in the Fall (September through November)	
By the end of October, preschool teachers or family child care providers visit a kindergarten classroom.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preschool program director ■ Elementary school principal ■ Kindergarten teacher ■ Family Child Care Provider
At principal's invitation, preschool teachers or family child care providers attend event that principals host for focusing on kindergarten transition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preschool program director ■ Elementary school principal
Program directors and family child care providers initiate communication with parents, directing them to resources on school readiness and kindergarten transition. This would include information about before and after-school care such as School Age Child Care (SACC), special programs, and other child care options.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Elementary school website ■ Elementary school principal ■ Fairfax County Office for Children (OFC) website www.fairfaxcounty.gov/ofc ■ School Age Child Care (SACC) registration line (703-449-8989)
To be completed in the Winter (December through February)	
Program directors or family child care providers notify parents of kindergarten registration and parent orientation dates.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Elementary school principal ■ Elementary school website
At winter parent/teacher conferences, preschool teachers or family child care providers discuss with parents their role in their child's school readiness and transition to kindergarten.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preschool program director ■ Preschool teacher ■ Family child care provider
To be completed in the Spring (March through May)	
Parents, preschool teachers, or family child care providers, and children attend kindergarten orientation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Elementary school principal ■ Elementary school website
Parents, preschool teachers, or family child care providers make an appointment for children to visit the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Elementary school principal ■ Family Services and Involvement Section of Fairfax County Public Schools ■ (703-277-2626)
<p>Preschool teachers or family child care providers conduct transition learning experiences with children. They can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Read stories ■ Invite school support staff to visit ■ Plan dramatic play activities related to the kindergarten experience ■ Have children dictate a letter to their new teacher ■ Have graduates of the preschool share their kindergarten experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preschool program director ■ Preschool teacher ■ Family child care provider

A seasonal schedule for year-round transition activities

The Community Calendar provides a suggested timeline for activities throughout the year to support the successful transition of young children and their families to kindergarten. These can be adapted to meet the specific needs and goals of each neighborhood.

Transition Activity	Who's Involved/Community Resources
<p>Program directors or family child care providers inform parents of the availability of the kindergarten video (Kindergarten: A New Beginning) at the public libraries. This could be shown as part of a family transition event held by centers or providers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fairfax County Public Libraries
<p>Preschool teachers or family child care providers schedule end-of-the-year conferences with parents to discuss children's progress and transition, giving parents the completed "Transition Form" for the parent to take to the kindergarten teacher. Encourage parents to get packet for kindergarten registration, and assist as needed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Program director ■ Preschool teacher ■ Family child care provider ■ Elementary school website ■ School parent liaison
<p>Preschool teachers or family child care providers send invitation to kindergarten teacher, with a copy to the principal, to visit preschool classrooms or family child care home.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Elementary school principal ■ Elementary school website
<p>Program directors, teachers, and family child care providers attend annual <i>School Readiness Symposium</i>, presented by Fairfax Futures, Fairfax County Office for Children and Fairfax County Public Schools.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fairfax Futures website www.fairfax-futures.org ■ Fairfax County Office for Children (OFC) website www.fairfaxcounty.gov/ofc
<p>Program directors or family child care providers review sample kindergarten registration packet and assist parents as needed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fairfax County Public Schools
<p>To be completed in the Summer (June through August)</p>	
<p>By end of June, program directors and providers remind parents to notify principals of children who are kindergarten-age eligible but are not attending public school kindergarten</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preschool program director ■ Family child care provider ■ Elementary school principal
<p>Preschool teachers or family child care providers reintroduce transition learning experiences with children.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preschool program director ■ Preschool teacher ■ Family child care provider
<p>Prior to the parents leaving the program, preschool directors and family child care providers remind parents to bring "Transition Form" to the kindergarten teacher, before the start of school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fairfax County Office for Children (OFC) website www.fairfaxcounty.gov/ofc
<p>Prior to the parents leaving the program, preschool directors and family child care providers remind parents to notify school personnel concerning any special needs their children might have, before the start of school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preschool Special Education (PSSE) ■ Mental health specialist ■ Pediatrician
<p>Preschool program directors and family child care providers distribute SACC information fliers to families with children entering kindergarten the following school year.</p>	<p>Preschool program director Family child care provider</p>

For More Information:

- Fairfax County Department of Family Services/Office for Children
www.fairfaxcounty.gov/ofc
- Fairfax County Public Schools
www.fcps.edu/DIS/OECFS
- Fairfax Futures
www.fairfax-futures.org

Paving the Way to Kindergarten is made possible through a grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation.

