

Families left out of Albemarle pre-K program  
written by Newspark Team | June 24, 2014



Next year, about 90 of Albemarle County's neediest 4-year-olds will enter kindergarten without any preschool experience because their families were stuck on a waiting list.

Pre-K experts say children who aren't school-ready are less likely to complete high school and are also likely to cost school divisions more money in intervention and remediation than students who have had preschool.

Locally, officials say two of the major obstacles to expanding pre-K are money and a lack of space in Albemarle's schools. Business and social services representatives say that pre-K needs greater attention and resources, and that a failure to do so will result in increased costs in the future.

Yet the most recent budget cycle showed that Bright Stars—Albemarle's preschool program for at-risk youth—is an initiative whose full ownership is split.

Faced with a \$3.9 million budget shortfall and a charter to provide K-12 services, not pre-K, the Albemarle School Board voted to eliminate about \$290,000 that was earmarked for Bright Stars. The Board of Supervisors agreed to absorb the cost for one year and revisit how pre-K is funded during a series of upcoming joint work sessions.



However, during the May 7 meeting in which the Supervisors picked up the cost, Supervisor Jane Dittmar said the Bright Stars funding issue raised “broader questions” about education priorities.

“Is this just the very beginning of a larger vision where we have to allocate funds along a continuum, and does that begin to fiscally constrain our K-12 because we are looking at this longer-term?” Dittmar asked.

Albemarle County served a total of 330 pre-K students last year. Looked at another way, with a waiting list of 90, about 27 percent of the students in Albemarle that the community believes should be in a public school pre-K classroom are not enrolled in one.

### Navigating the Waters

Bright Stars—which last year provided 41 percent of Albemarle’s public preschool offerings—delivers preschool to 4-year-olds who have multiple risk factors beyond poverty.

As part of the program, students attend their home elementary schools, and the families are assigned family support workers who help address difficulties in the homes until the child completes fifth grade.

And the program works. According to Bright Stars’ 2013 annual report, the percentage of students meeting benchmark literacy scores between the fall and spring rose from 27 percent to 74 percent.

### Bright Stars Students Literacy Screening Benchmark Scores | Create Infographics

In 2013-14, the program provided classroom seats to 137 preschoolers. In order to ensure all of those students are served, Bright Stars places some of them with private pre-K providers.

“As a preschool, we are very much advocates of the Bright Stars program and what they do,” said Paige Linbelom, the former director of First United Methodist Preschool, with whom Albemarle has been placing children since 2008.

“It gives us so much support and enables us to carry through with our goal of having children at our preschool who are at-risk,” Linbelom added.

Last year, Bright Stars also placed six children at the YMCA, and plans to place five more there next school year.

Kathy Glazer, president of the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, said that in addition to serving more students, the strategy of placing some children in private facilities can come with silver linings. For example, Glazer said, some private facilities can often provide a longer day than schools, making it easier on working parents.

But there are also drawbacks to the approach.

In part, Albemarle pays for Bright Stars through the Virginia Preschool Initiative, which values a year of

preschool at \$6,000—a figure less than the tuition most private facilities charge.

Luckily, both First United and the YMCA have active scholarship foundations and donors that help defray the difference, but if Albemarle were to expand this approach, it would be forced to rely on providers who also provide scholarships.

Michelle Ryan, the early childhood director at the YMCA in Charlottesville, said the “vast majority of our kids” don’t pay the full tuition. However, Ryan said, while the YMCA does extend financial aid, serving Bright Stars students doesn’t come without a strain on the organization.

“Taking Bright Stars students is hard financially in that they have more school holidays, as well as spring and summer break,” Ryan said. “They’re not paying for that time, but we still hold their spots and pay for staffing.”

Additionally, VPI is expensive.

### The Virginia Preschool Initiative

Established in 1996, VPI was created at the state level in order to meet the needs of those students who go unserved by Head Start—the federal preschool program. Each locality is given a certain number of “slots” it can fill, and in order to draw down funds from VPI to fill those slots, localities must provide a local match, which is determined by a locality’s Local Composite Index, or relative wealth.

In Albemarle’s case that number is \$3,000 per child, which is the maximum contribution a locality can be required to make.

According to the *School Readiness Report Card*, prepared by Smart Beginnings, in 2013 Albemarle put up the funds for all of its allotted slots. However, Scott Latham, who was a graduate student at the Batten School when he penned *Increasing Take Up of the Virginia Preschool Initiative*, wonders how Albemarle can be using all of its slots if Bright Stars still has such a large waitlist.

Charles Pyle, the Virginia Department of Education’s director of communications, said that a division’s allotment of VPI slots is determined by a formula, not by a count of actual children.

A 2013 VPI Brief provided to Charlottesville Tomorrow by Pyle states that in the 2012-14 state budget, the number of VPI slots was “based on the projected number of kindergarten students updated once each biennium.”

“That helps explain the question of why Albemarle County has a waitlist if the state is saying they’re using their slots,” Glazer said.

Glazer said another reason for this could be that the VPI allocation is based on the number of 4-year-olds whose families are at a certain income level. However, Glazer said, each locality can then develop their own specific criteria for enrollment. In Albemarle’s case, Bright Stars students must meet additional criteria beyond poverty in order to qualify.

“For FY 2015 and beyond,” the VDOE Brief continues, “the number of unserved at-risk 4-year-olds in each division will be based on the projected number of kindergarten students.”

“The division level free lunch eligibility percentage will be used as the at-risk criterion in the funding

formula,” the Brief adds.

## Growing Demand

According to early projections, Albemarle’s allotment of VPI slots is estimated to jump next year by almost 40, to 175. This almost 28 percent increase mirrors the upward trend the division has seen in free and reduced lunch numbers in the last six years, from a total of 21 percent of all students to a high of 28 percent this past school year.

## Free & Reduced Lunch in Albemarle County Public Schools | Create Infographics

Just as the area’s need for preschool grows, so too is the school division’s overall K-12 population, which is beginning to put a strain on elementary school buildings. A recent report by the Long Range Planning Advisory Committee showed that pre-K programs occupied 20 classrooms at 13 elementary schools, over half of which are over capacity or are projected to be soon.

“Additions onto Woodbrook, Scottsville, & Yancey would not be needed if pre-K programs didn’t occupy space in the buildings,” the report adds.

Last year, seven of Albemarle’s 16 elementary schools were over capacity. That number jumps to eight in 2014-15, and nine in 2015-16.

What’s more, the School Board holds firm that Bright Stars students attend their home elementary schools in order to eliminate transitions and jump-start relationship-building between families and school staff.

“You want to get those kids to connect and to get their parents to connect, and if you have a central preschool you don’t have that advantage,” Albemarle School Board member Steve Koleszar said.

In addition to facilities questions, Koleszar said funding to address the growing waitlist is also a concern.

“The funding is different than K-12,” Koleszar said. “Technically it’s a Board of Supervisors program.”

## Other Models

Another Smart Beginnings report, *Virginia’s Preschool Puzzle*, highlights successful pre-K models around the Commonwealth.

Some localities, like Alexandria City Public Schools, are taking a similar approach to Albemarle and are placing students in both their own schools and with private providers.

Others, like Augusta County, are using a strategy called “braided funds.” To do this, Augusta pools its Head Start, VPI and other pre-K money together, but doesn’t label the children—and thus the classrooms—via funding source.

“By doing that then there is kind of no waste,” Glazer said. “If Head Start can only put 15 in a classroom but are allowed to put 20 in, couldn’t VPI buy some slots?”

“It’s not simple, but it’s something some communities are doing well and finding results with,” Glazer added.

In the meantime, Ann McAndrew, the new Bright Stars coordinator, is keen to get more children served.

“I don’t know if we can get to this this school year, but if we can’t find more space in schools, we may begin to look for more private spaces,” McAndrew said.

Glazer remains optimistic, but is also aware of the financial realities.

“With K-12 budgets being tight, it’s a poignant conversation because most superintendents recognize the value to families and schools when children come prepared,” Glazer said.

“It’s a matter of collaborative community commitment,” Glazer added. “It’s not a simple conversation and the budgets have only strained it.”

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#### Early Childhood Idea Lab

In the course of researching early childhood education, Charlottesville Tomorrow has discovered a number of ideas on the minds of local experts for how pre-K could be improved. Have an idea of your own? Please share it with a comment below.

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#### Investor financing

Some states and localities are using “social impact bonds” to raise funds to invest in early childhood programs. If students are better prepared for school, there are less costs incurred for remedial services. Investors receive a “pay for success” return on their investment and long-term savings are generated for taxpayers.

#### Creative budgeting and supervision

Some localities in Virginia “braid” all their pre-K funding sources together (Federal, state & local). Doing so allows localities to more efficiently allocate resources and maximize enrollment, as opposed to running separate piecemeal programs that can be harder to evaluate.

#### City-County collaboration

Charlottesville-Albemarle has joint facilities for career & technical education and special education, is there an opportunity to work better together on pre-K for our at-risk 4-year-olds?

#### Schools administer pre-K

Since pre-K is an educational program, the schools could take full ownership of pre-K and plan accordingly (for facilities, teachers and family support workers). This approach would take support from the appropriating bodies (i.e., City Council; Board of Supervisors). In Albemarle, local government, not the school division, has responsibility for pre-K.

#### Public-private partnerships

Some communities seek public-private partnerships to utilize private school seats, and fund those placements through local government budgets, grants and private donations.