Commonwealth of VA logo


COMMONWEALTH *of* VIRGINIA

**Guidance for Partnering to Provide Child Care during Virtual Learning**

Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Department of Social Services

*August 4, 2020*

# The Shared Challenge:

Virtual learning for public schools increases the need for safe, supervised care for an increased number of children from pre-K through age 12. School divisions should consider partnering closely with local government, child care providers and community organizations (e.g., afterschool providers) to identify the need for out-of-home care while students are participating in virtual learning and offer options that address their unique needs.

# The Goal:

Partnerships should focus on establishing safe, supervised settings that will enable enrolled students to learn virtually. **In the absence of in-person instruction, it is imperative that school divisions and their partners create solutions for working parents, while taking health precautions against COVID-19, so that all children have a safe place during the day from which they can engage in virtual learning. Please note that this is different from traditional child care for this age group which typically focuses on out-of-school time.**

While not responsible for “child care” per se, divisions must provide new instruction to all enrolled students in 2020-2021. With virtual instruction, students must not only have access to instruction and materials but also a safe setting that is conducive to learning. Students who lack access to safe, quiet spaces with adequate adult supervision will *not* be able to fully engage with educators and peers, complete activities and assignments and seek adult assistance when needed. In other words, they will *not* be able to learn.

In addition, school, and school-based early education programs are critical to enabling employment for many parents and guardians. Without access to out-of-home learning opportunities, many will simply be unable to work or work effectively.

# Priority Populations

Each community should assess which families and children have the greatest need for care and want to participate in-person. Partnerships should use an equity lens and should prioritize children and families who need in-person programming including 1) children with parents/guardians who are school employees or other essential workers, 2) young learners (pre-K through third grade), 3) students with special needs, 4) Dual Language Learners, 5) homeless and vulnerable populations and 6) other students for which their in-home settings may not be conducive for independent remote learning.

# Areas of Consideration

It’s important to note that more than 3,000 private child care programs in Virginia have remained open throughout the pandemic and have effectively adapted to keep preschool and school-aged children, families and staff safe. This guidance is based in part on lessons learned from these providers and offers considerations for public schools in the following topic areas:

* Need for Care and Available Supply
* Facilities and Licensing
* Health and Safety Considerations
* Funding
* Supplies
* Technology
* Food Service
* Student Needs
* Communication with Partners and Parents

Any questions regarding child care partnerships for public schools may be directed to [earlychildhood@doe.virginia.gov](mailto:earlychildhood@doe.virginia.gov).

# Need for Care and Available Supply

* Families have expressed different preferences for in-person learning and care throughout the COIVD-19 pandemic. School divisions should work with community partners to evaluate how many families would need care AND be willing to participate in-person. Note that factors such as cost, transportation and hours of coverage will affect demand. School divisions are now asked to include a description of such efforts as part of the instructional plans submitted to the VDOE.
* School divisions, along with community partners, should consider using surveys and other techniques to evaluate baseline need. Note, however, that open child care providers have found that participation tends to increase over time as families learn through word-of-mouth that there are safe options available. Increasing capacity over time may be necessary.
* As part of this process, families should be asked about basic preferences such as setting, hours and transportation to ensure options fully meet their needs.
* School divisions should also work with partners to identify open care options within their community. [Child Care Aware of Virginia](https://vachildcare.com/data/request-data/) can provide up-to-date data on open providers. Contact 804-285-0846.
* Communities should focus on equity and prioritize families in the greatest need as the private child care sector will likely continue to adapt to meet the needs of families with more resources.

# Facilities and Licensing

Many factors help determine whether a space needs to be licensed as a child care center including site type, operator (i.e., whether it is run by a school or community partner), ages served and hours of operation. Communities are advised to seek legal counsel as it relates to interpreting these requirements. Here is general guidance:

1. Offer care in an existing licensed child care center or family day home: Any existing provider can continue to offer child care to families and partner with schools if space is available at the licensed facility. If a change in licensure status is required it should be submitted to the program’s licensing inspector.
2. Offer child care in the school facility: Any public school may operate emergency child care for preschool- or school-aged children of essential personnel during a declared state or local emergency due to COVID-19 and be exempt from licensure. Note that programs are only exempt from licensure for services provided to children of essential personnel, which includes children of school personnel. Emergency child care hosted by public schools must follow all safety and supervisory standards established by the local school division, including standards for background checks.
3. Expand child care previously offered in the school facility: Community partners who are licensed to offer before and/or after care to school-aged children in school settings can apply to VDSS for a modification to their license to offer full-time child care. All requests for a change in licensure status should be submitted to the program’s licensing inspector.
4. Work with a local government: Local governments can operate a child care program and be exempt from state licensure requirements by offering recreational activities for school-aged children. Such programs must be staffed by local government employees and must comply with local health and safety requirements.

* Schools should work with partners to identify the most accessible, safe and appropriate for spaces based on age, grade and needs of students and families. This could include re-purposing school classrooms, libraries and gyms as well as other community spaces such as libraries or community centers.
* School-age students will require conditions that are conducive to participating in remote learning. This would include a dedicated workspace (e.g. desk and chair) as well as access to Internet and electricity. The setting must also be quiet enough so that the student can fully participate. Finally, students should have access to outdoor space when possible.
* Schools must follow all safety and supervisory standards established by the local school division, including standards for background checks.
* Public schools using their own facility should consult legal counsel to ensure compliance with applicable federal or state laws and local ordinances and ensure compliance with the requirements for the operation of child care programs outside of the regular school hours.

# Health and Safety

* Keeping students, educators and caregivers healthy and safe must be the top priority. Use the regulations and guidelines from the [Center for Disease Control (CDC)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html) and the [Virginia Department of Health (VDH)](https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/schools-workplaces-community-locations/k-12-education/) as well as [Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/office/covid-19.shtml) and [Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS)](https://www.dss.virginia.gov/cc/covid-19.html) guidance resources.
* School divisions and local departments of health should collaborate to ensure that child care partners have access to local public health experts and nurses as needed. This could include providing a school nurse on-call so that child care staff can call if an issue arises with a student while virtually learning at the child care center.
* In line with the [statewide VDOE-VDSS-VDH contact tracing protocol](https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/content/uploads/sites/182/2020/06/VDH-Schools-and-Contact-Tracing_062620_Final.pdf), communities should ensure all partners are aware of these expectations and every site has a point person for contact tracing.
* School divisions, along with local partners, should ensure that local departments of health are aware of school-child care partnerships, the number of sites and students involved and ensure open, regular communication.
* All partners should consider the impact of social determinants of health and what protocols, materials and other resources are needed to keep the most vulnerable children, families and educators safe. Families of color have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, are more likely to have to work out of the home and are more likely to live in multi-generational homes with adults at greater risk.

# Funding

* School divisions should consider potential savings or lower operating costs due to virtual or hybrid schedules and allocate additional funding to pay child care providers and/or community partners to provide care and enable remote learning. Note that child care is an allowable expense for ESSER funding and other CARES Act funding that went to schools and localities.
* There is limited other federal or state funding available for emergency child care. School divisions are encouraged to maximize current resources so that families in need can access the care at no or low cost. Schools should start with current providers of child care, including centers and family day homes, as well as out-of-school time (OST) providers such as the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs.
* Typically labor and facilities are the most expensive costs of providing temporary child care. School divisions should consider providing funding to existing child care or OST providers who have capacity and/or using division facilities so that partners can access larger spaces with sufficient resources. School divisions should also reach out to family day homes and determine if there is additional capacity as some families may prefer smaller settings in their communities. Doing so can help minimize expensive start-up costs for temporary care.
* School divisions, along with local government, child care providers and community partners, should also explore innovative solutions such as temporary job re-assignments and job-sharing (e.g., having a support staff person reassigned to help support child care services) to maximize all available resources – funding, staffing, transportation, materials, technology, etc. Schools can consider offering subsidized child care to employees which has potential tax benefits.
* School divisions should also consider what transportation resources may be needed to ensure equitable access and defray operating costs.
* Schools that are considering charging fees should consult legal counsel to ensure compliance with applicable federal or state laws and local policies.
* Federal, state and local funds appropriated to establish, support and maintain public schools may be used in support of virtual instruction which could include addressing the custodial care of students. Schools should consult legal counsel on use of funds.

# Supplies

* School divisions should help ensure that child care providers and community partners can access adequate cleaning and sanitation supplies at all times. School divisions and/or local government partners can use their purchasing power to provide supplies including but not limited to commercial cleaning supplies, hand sanitizers, soap, facial coverings, gloves and other materials that are less expensive to purchase in bulk.
* School and child care leaders should do walk-throughs of potential sites and identify what materials/resources that schools have available that can be provided to child care providers and community partners. This could include books, paper, writing utensils, art/music supplies, physical education materials as well as technology materials (see below).
* Remote learning for younger students may involve less screen time and more in-person activities, manipulative exercises and projects. School divisions should make sure that child care and community partners have adequate materials for young learners and child care.

# Technology

* School-age children will likely need to access instruction via devices such as laptops or tablets. School divisions should work with child care partners to ensure they have adequate supplies including laptops, chargers, headsets with microphones, and surge protectors. Ideally divisions should provide child care sites with back-up materials in case a student forgets or a device fails to work on any given day.
* Communities should also ensure that child care centers have sufficient internet access and consider strengthening the internet access at the site.
* School-aged children may need access to printed workbooks or packets. School divisions should provide printed materials directly to child care partner sites and/or make printers available in child care sites so that materials relevant to the student’s work can be easily printed.
* School divisions should ensure that child care staff have access to the division’s IT help desk or equivalent function so that child care educators can contact staff for assistance if there are issues with devices, technology or internet access.

# Food Services

* School divisions must ensure that students have access to food at child care partner sites. USDA will permit reimbursement only for food made available on instructional days, including remote or virtual instructional days. Divisions should consider providing meals to child care centers through the food program.

# Student Needs

* Students who need in-person programming may also need additional socio-emotional or mental health supports and would benefit from trauma-informed programming. School divisions and partners should work together to identify resources to support vulnerable students and ensure that caregivers can make referrals or bring services on site where feasible.
* School divisions must ensure that students with special needs can have all their needs met in the child care setting in accordance with all applicable federal and state regulations. Doing so may require school divisions to review and update the IEP, provide additional materials to the child care partner, communicate more frequently with families and connect the teachers and/or interventionists with the child care staff.
* School divisions should also work with child care and community partners to ensure that in-person programming is linguistically and culturally responsive for students and families.

# Communication with Partners and Parents

* Clear, consistent and frequent communication will be critical for school divisions, child care partners and families. School divisions should establish structures for effective three-way communication (family-school-child care) as well regular communication channels directly to child care partners such as weekly emails. Partners should include existing child care centers and family day homes as well as new providers of emergency child care.
* School divisions should consider establishing an educational liaison or point person for the child care partners. Doing so can help ensure that child care leaders and educators can contact someone to seek assistance if there are questions or concerns about learning or instruction. For very young learners or Dual Language Learners, the educational liaison could play a very important role in ensuring that learners are able to fully access virtual learning. For older students, the educational liaison can help ensure attendance and participation, submission of work and ongoing progress. Note, however, that school divisions cannot expect that child care educators will provide instruction; instruction remains the responsibility of the school division.
* School divisions may offer parent or guardian training and resources in preparation for remote learning. Child care and community partners should be included in any training activities and should receive all support materials. School divisions should also consider specific training for caregivers who are facilitating remote instruction.
* Families remain responsible for attendance and school divisions remain responsible for tracking attendance. School divisions should share [attendance guidance](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2020/188-20.docx) with partners and discuss strategies for ensuring regular attendance, monitoring participation and collaborating interventions if students suddenly stop attending out-of-home care.
* In line with the contact tracing protocols, schools and child care partners should coordinate communications to parents and families as it relates to notification of positive cases and potential exposure to COVID-19 positive individuals.