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Virginia Approves Choice Legislation for Pre-K Students

3/27/2019 -- Legislation introduced by state Senator Bill Stanley (SB1015) expanding Virginia's Education Improvement Scholarship Tax Credit (EISTC) program for use by pre-kindergarten children has been signed into law by Governor Ralph Northam.

"This will provide new opportunity for thousands of preschool children unable to obtain services through either Head Start or the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI)" said Chris Braunlich, vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute and a former president of the Virginia State Board of Education.

Most children unable to obtain services are denied them because there either is no space in the public schools or the locality chose not to make a required 'local match.'

"No child should be denied quality services because adults insist on a 'public school only' option and then fail to fund it," Braunlich said. "This is an opportunity for the private sector to step up to the plate, and we hope they hit a home run."

"This is an important new program to offer Early Childhood Education options to low and middle income children through a school choice initiative," Braunlich added. "We believe it not only fills in tremendous gaps in preschool education but will go a long way towards ensuring all children get to the starting line of kindergarten better equipped to succeed in school and in life."

Under existing EISTC law, tax credits are awarded to individuals and businesses making donations to nonprofit scholarship foundations using the donated funds to award scholarships to certain students in grades K-12 attending nonpublic schools. Eligible scholarship recipients are students in grades K-12 with a finalized individualized education program (IEP) in place or whose annual household income is not in excess of 300 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.

The new law expands that option to four-year-olds unable to obtain preschool services through Head Start or Virginia Preschool Initiative. The maximum annual scholarship for a private preschool will be the lesser of the child's actual tuition or the state's share of the grant under the VPI.

The new law was approved on bipartisan votes in both the Virginia House of Delegates and State Senate. It defines an eligible pre-kindergarten child and a nonpublic pre-kindergarten program and includes several other curriculum and administrative requirements that must be met by a nonpublic pre-kindergarten program in order for children attending the program to be eligible to receive scholarships under the tax credit program. Under the bill, the Virginia Council

for Private Education or the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation will certify nonpublic pre-kindergarten programs meeting such curriculum and administrative requirements.

“A significant coalition recognized the importance of quality early childhood education – whatever its source – and worked together to get this passed,” Braunlich noted, “among them the Virginia Council for Private Education, the Virginia Catholic Conference and the Family Foundation.”

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