

Katherine Busser, Executive Vice President, Capital One Financial Corporation, Virginia

Katherine Busser, Executive Vice President of Capital One Financial Corporation, became interested in early education when she saw how her own children had benefitted from it. When she decided to examine it more seriously, she conducted the same thorough analysis that has made her a strong business leader in the competitive financial world. Not content with only understanding the issue from an academic and research perspective, she committed personal time to every facet of the issue --volunteering in preschool classrooms; serving as president of the Richmond, Virginia YWCA Board and participating on the city's United Way Board and the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (a private-public partnership that supports regional early childhood initiatives); and serving as president of the Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce and its Leadership Council. This has enabled her to understand the issue's many layers, including the diverse perspectives associated with pre-k at the state and local levels and from the public, private, business, and government points of view. With this broad perspective and extensive network, she can effectively exercise leadership by "knitting together all of the pieces."

These varied experiences, in conjunction with her service on Governor Mark R. Warner's Early Learning Council, made her an ideal choice to chair Governor Timothy M. Kaine's Start Strong Council, created in 2006. In July 2007, members submitted six key recommendations to the governor to develop expanded access to high quality pre-k for four-year-olds. Busser continues to extend her support in moving the pre-k agenda forward by participating in a newly-formed business coalition, Virginia Business for Smart Beginnings, which is managed by the Virginia Early Learning Foundation.

Busser's passion for pre-k is two-fold: First, as the parent of two children, she wants every Virginia four-year-old to experience the same benefits as did her children from participating in high quality preschools. Second, she thinks it inevitable that the state will face increased workforce challenges in the future unless it ensures that all four-year-olds have access to an excellent pre-k education. She notes that for the past two years, Virginia has been recognized by *Forbes* magazine as the best place to do business. This recognition is due in large measure to the caliber of the state's education system and its workforce. "I'm concerned," she says, "that people may begin to take this status for granted. We cannot afford to do so, though, and this requires investments in education, and especially in pre-k, so when kids hit the workforce in 15-20 years, they will be ready."

Busser devotes tremendous time and energy to making sure others understand the critical importance of pre-k to the state's future economic well-being and productivity. She has spoken to business leaders and groups across the state, as well as to school leaders, state and county officials, and legislators. She also has channeled Capital One pro bono services to support the branding, marketing, and advertising of pre-k efforts. "This is a place," she says, "where business leaders can be effective by leveraging their talents and resources to meet a community need."

Busser views business leaders as particularly effective in legislative advocacy, as well. This is familiar terrain for business leaders, she notes, and they are used to being persuasive on both sides of the aisle. Busser invites business colleagues to join her when she testifies before the General Assembly or meets with legislators so they can become familiar and comfortable with this kind of exchange. She also has helped create a Greater Richmond regional group of business leaders involved with this issue that courts other business leaders to join them. The 'courting' occurs by inviting business leaders to join the group for lunch and to listen to business leaders such as Jeffrey Lacker, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, to tell their stories about how they became involved with the issue.

Busser describes the work as a long-term strategic effort that requires team effort. Pursuing this sports analogy, Busser advises early childhood advocates that they need to care enough to let others step in to carry the ball forward to the goal post. "People who nurtured the issue for so long need to know when to let the next type of leadership step in to take the issue to the next level. It's a team sport, and you need to know when to pass the ball so the team can succeed."

Busser has enjoyed working on this issue in part because of the other business colleagues she has met along the way. “It’s an issue focused on a greater good,” she contends, “one that is about changing the trajectory of a generation of children. It’s why so many of us who become involved find it a calling.” Clearly, Busser has found hers, to the benefit of Virginia’s and America’s children.

The results of her efforts have demonstrated the power of her involvement: In 2008, the state increased public funding for the Virginia Preschool Initiative, despite a very tight budget, by \$10.5 million in FY09 and \$10.1 million in FY10.