GOVERNOR WARNER KICKS OFF EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT
~Summit brings together private and public leaders to discuss early learning programs~

RICHMOND - Governor Mark R. Warner today brought together prominent public and private sector leaders for an Early Childhood Summit, a component of his Education for a Lifetime initiative, and announced the formation of an Early Learning Council. The Summit, which focuses on how to improve early learning opportunities for Virginia’s children, also will include two sessions in early June.

“Statistics from the University of Virginia show that 20 percent of the Commonwealth’s children enter kindergarten without the basic skills needed to learn,” said Governor Warner. “Early childhood development is a vital part of every child’s education, and we must make sure that students have the foundation of learning necessary to succeed before they set foot in a classroom.”

A significant part of the Warner administration’s efforts to improve early learning is a near $50 million increase in state funding for local pre-school programs serving at-risk four-year-olds. As a result of budget and tax reform in 2004, the General Assembly agreed to increase funding from 60 percent of the unserved population to 90 percent this year and 100 percent in Fiscal Year 2006.

The centerpiece of the Summit was today’s Governor’s Leadership Luncheon for nearly 200 key business and government leaders, which was sponsored in partnership with the Robins Foundation and The Norfolk Foundation. Another key component was the Employer Strategy Session on Wednesday, which was sponsored by Bon Secours Richmond Health System and the VCU Health System. This session provided leaders of Virginia’s corporate community with an opportunity to learn about smart strategies addressing their workforce’s work/life issues, including quality child care.

“Virginia is grappling with the reality that too many children begin school significantly behind their peers, for many preventable reasons,” said Virginia Secretary of Health and Human Resources Jane H. Woods. “This summit is an opportunity for a broader partnership between families, child care providers, and business and community leaders, because we all benefit from the results.”
The Early Learning Council will study how businesses can help improve early childhood education in the Commonwealth. The members of the Council will be announced in late June, and the group of leading public and private sector officials is expected to make recommendations in the fall.

During the luncheon, former North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt, Jr. discussed North Carolina’s successful Smart Start early learning program, considered a national model among public-private partnerships in delivering high-quality preschool education.

In June, the Early Childhood Summit will focus on what child care providers and communities can do. The Smart Strategies for Front Line Leaders session for child care providers, which will include training devoted to sharpening their skills as business owners, will be held on June 4, 2005. A Learning Community for Early Childhood Partnership Session, which will highlight innovative models, pilot programs and success stories of what communities in Virginia are doing to address early childhood development, will be held on June 7, 2005.