

# The Virginian-Pilot

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## Local preschools scooping up stars

By [Cheryl Ross](#)  
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Carol Wilson screamed with joy last month when she learned her preschool program had earned four out of five stars from the state. "It was like winning a gold medal in the Olympics," said Wilson, director of Portsmouth's Simonsdale Presbyterian Preschool.

Wilson's preschool and JCOC Oceanfront Head Start in Virginia Beach are the first early childhood programs in South Hampton Roads to earn a four-star rating under the Virginia Star Quality Initiative.

No facility in Virginia has earned five stars under the program, which is administered by the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and the Virginia Office of Early Childhood Development.

"The quality rating system is really the Consumer Reports of child care," said Lisa Howard, president and CEO of Smart Beginnings South Hampton Roads, the nonprofit that coordinates local participation in the program.

The first round of ratings were released last year. Parents can find ratings online at [www.smartbeginnings.org](http://www.smartbeginnings.org) and related sites.

No facility in the state has received a rating less than two stars, but even a rating of one star means a facility is improving. Facilities in the initiative voluntarily open their doors to state-trained raters who assess interactions between teachers and children, and the quality of the learning environment and instruction.

The facilities also provide documents to the state verifying their teachers' education, qualifications and training, as well as the staff-to-child ratio and the number of children in each class, said Katie Squibb, a quality coordinator at Smart Beginnings South Hampton Roads.

Following those assessments, state-trained mentors help the facilities develop and implement improvement plans.

Smart Beginnings South Hampton Roads, which has been involved in the program since 2007, has recruited 78 facilities around the area to participate, Squibb said.

To date, 19 of those have received ratings.

Smart Beginnings provides scholarships to teachers in the program to help them attain academic degrees and certificates in early childhood education, Squibb said.

Facilities can attain higher ratings based on the level of education of its staff.

"Everything that we do is to help these centers get a higher rating," Squibb said.

Simonsdale teacher Sandra Ratcliff is studying early childhood education at [Tidewater Community College](#) thanks to the program.

"I'm extremely grateful for it because I would not be able to do it on my own," she said.

*Cheryl Ross, (757) 446-2443, [cheryl.ross@pilotonline.com](mailto:cheryl.ross@pilotonline.com)*