The education of young children has slowly become more important to parents and teachers. The view of pre-kindergarten education has developed from being a nice idea, to a crucial need.

Smart Beginnings Greater Prince William will soon be part of that change in the Prince William County, Manassas City and Manassas Park areas. Its hope is to encourage the education of young children, by evaluating the local caregivers and giving them the tools they need to improve.

“It’s a way to evaluate and put a star rating on preschools, daycares, any kind of early childhood care providers in our community,” said Sharon Henry, executive director of SPARK Inc.

SPARK is the Education Foundation for Prince William County Schools, and will serve as the fiscal agent for Smart Beginnings.

Henry said the idea behind the rating system is to raise the quality of living in the area. She hopes that when people see what type of early childcare services there are in the area, they will be more likely to live and work here.

The area does already have a rating system for childcare services, but the group received a planning grant on July 15, which will allow them to make a fresh start and evaluate the needs in the area.

“We find in Prince William County schools that about 80 percent of our students coming into kindergarten are not ready to be there,” Henry said. “When I heard that number, I was shocked."

This percentage worries more than educators. Business managers want to see a continuously strong workforce, which is why Smart Beginnings really started after a Business Leaders Summit, sponsored by PNC last May.

The PNC Foundation and the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation provided the $50,000 planning grant. This amount was later added to by an anonymous donor from Alexandria and the Prince William Area Quality Child Care Partnership.

Another person deeply committed to this project is Paul Schuessler, who is also chair of the Prince William Area Quality Child Care Partnership.

“What’s interesting to me as I started down this road is that kindergarteners in our area take their first readiness test in October,” Schuessler said.

He noted that October is an early time to be evaluated, for children with no prior program experience. At such an early time, children might not know how to pay attention, stand in line or work in a large group.

Also, Schuessler said that 85 percent of a child’s brain is developed by age 5, which is why he believes children need instruction prior to kindergarten to be successful in the future.

“Parents make decisions on where to put their children based on cost, availability and quality,” Schuessler said.

This is why Smart Beginnings has brought on Kendra Kielbasa as the grant coordinator to produce a needs statement and conduct community meetings to see where children’s readiness is lacking. She will also work with a council that will oversee the process.

Kielbasa wants to bring together the community stakeholders and educate people on the development of children’s brains and what good learning components are.

“We’re going to combine all of those groups together and do some collective thinking, brainstorming,” Kielbasa said.

Kielbasa officially started her role as grant coordinator on August 15, and is not sure what she expects to find, but plans to start by looking at older community needs assessments.

She has prior experience in public relations as a small business owner, working with start-up programs and non-profit work.

“I think it’s important to recognize that we now have this information on how a child’s brain develops,” Kielbasa said.

She added that attention and focus skills are developed by the age of 3.