



## Sowing Seeds for Growth in Access to Quality Early Education



## TSION TECKLE, TEACHER, APPLETREE COLUMBIA HEIGHTS

*Guided by her commitment to family and community, Tsion Teckle pursued a dream to help improve the trajectory of children's lives by teaching at AppleTree.*

Growing up in a family of six, Tsion always knew she had an affinity for kids, but her path to becoming a preschool teacher at AppleTree was a winding one. With a background in mass communications, she began her career in media and production right out of college, but something kept telling her that she had not yet found her true calling. Over time, her desire to find a career to fulfill her passions grew stronger. She began exploring opportunities to work directly with children and learned about AppleTree. AppleTree is a nonprofit organization that delivers high-quality early education to children from under-resourced families, with the mission to close the achievement gap before they enter kindergarten, ensuring that they start kindergarten with the same skills as their more affluent peers. When she took the leap to become a preschool teacher at AppleTree, Tsion knew that she had landed in the right place.

Tsion started working at AppleTree in 2010, excited to contribute her playful personality and

her passion for “being in front of an audience” to the position. But as a brand-new teacher, she understood that she would need clear and thorough training and guidance to best serve her students. Ultimately, it was AppleTree’s *Every Child Ready* instructional model that gave her the skills and confidence required to meet the organization’s high standards. “I had no prior background in education when I started and while I knew I was great with kids, I didn’t necessarily know how to set up a lesson plan. I remember how happy I was to be provided with a layout and the tools to help me learn the concepts behind the lessons, the objectives of what is most important to make sure students understand and how to teach most effectively,” said Tsion. She started her career at AppleTree as a teaching assistant and then was accepted as a teaching fellow. As part of the fellowship program, she worked under the mentorship of an experienced teacher for a full year before becoming an AppleTree teacher.

AppleTree developed the *Every Child Ready* instructional model on the principle that when teachers learn more, students learn more. In the process of making *Every Child Ready* as robust as possible, AppleTree approached teachers like Tsion for input on how to help them teach more effectively. Six years later, Tsion is now a poised and skillful AppleTree teacher. “Now that I’m well-versed in the *Every Child Ready* curriculum, I have the flexibility to be more creative and the opportunity make it my own,” she said.

Not only has Tsion noticed growth in her effectiveness as a teacher, she has also seen how *Every Child Ready* helps students in her classroom thrive. She recalled one young student: “Michael [name changed to protect his privacy] was very introverted, and it was a challenge in the beginning to help him adapt to an environment where we play and learn freely.” His shyness, along with the fact that English was his second language, made it challenging for Tsion to pinpoint his needs and help him progress. Tsion was determined, though, and used the *Every Child Ready* curriculum and individual instruction to help him grow. By the time he left AppleTree, Tsion had seen a significant jump in his learning – Michael was sounding out words, speaking in full sentences, and able to count and write his numbers from 1 to 20. According to his *Every Child Ready* assessment scores, at the beginning of the year, Michael achieved a 25 percent score on the language and literacy assessment, but by the end of the year he had achieved a 78 percent score. Similarly on the math assessment, Michael went from 32 percent to 91 percent.

Tsion was thrilled to see Michael again when his family enrolled his sister in her class. It was one of her proudest moments hearing her former student, who was just learning English in her preschool classroom, say so clearly, “Hi, Ms. Teckle. How are you?”

It also makes Tsion proud to be, as they say at her Columbia Heights campus, “a piece of the puzzle” of the impact that AppleTree makes on children’s lives. She is honored that her Ethiopian heritage and her emphasis on community engagement has helped her build strong bonds with students and their families in one of the most diverse communities in D.C. But what Tsion says is the most significant reason why she teaches and what makes her proud every single day to be part of the AppleTree family is the opportunity to see how much all of her students grow physically, socially, intellectually and emotionally.





# The Investment Partner: AppleTree

AppleTree Institute for Education Innovation (AppleTree) is a nonprofit organization consisting of a research institute and a public charter preschool with campuses throughout Washington, D.C. AppleTree's mission is to close the achievement gap before students enter kindergarten by providing them with the social, emotional and cognitive skills they need to thrive in school.

AppleTree was founded in 1996, when social entrepreneurs Jack McCarthy and Lex Towle invested in the idea of increasing the supply of effective schools through innovation. Jack, AppleTree's President and CEO, chronicles the story of AppleTree's founding:

At first, we created a charter school incubator for middle and high school students, but a year later we recognized that students who entered our school at this level were reading at a fourth or fifth grade level. The goal was to help them make a year's worth of progress, but we found it much more challenging than we anticipated. We realized that we might be able to have a greater impact if we went back to the very beginning to help students. After some research on early education, we decided to start an early learning program ourselves to create the change we wanted to see in students' lives.

We kept going and got into the education reform space. Not too long after, we began working on developing an instructional model, based on what we were learning, and designed the evidence-based *Every Child Ready* instructional model. This was a seminal moment in our development, and it is our instructional model that positioned us to flourish and work toward our mission.

The AppleTree Institute conducts research and development to demonstrate outcomes and effectiveness in early teaching and learning. AppleTree's research institute staff designed the *Every Child Ready* instructional model for AppleTree schools and other



educational organizations. From curriculum to assessment and professional development, the AppleTree Institute creates and implements innovative, data-driven tools to prepare children for success throughout their primary education.

In 2005, AppleTree launched AppleTree Early Learning Public Charter School as a scalable, multi-site preschool. Today, AppleTree's charter schools educate over 600 children annually. AppleTree recognizes that early interventions are critical to closing the achievement gap before children begin K–12 education. With six schools planted throughout D.C., AppleTree ensures that children who transition into kindergarten from its schools do so with the strong academic and social skills needed to succeed in elementary school and beyond.

Together, the research institute and AppleTree public charter schools produce and use the *Every Child Ready* instructional model. *Every Child Ready* is AppleTree's evidence-based early learning instructional model that drives what to teach, how to teach and how to tell if children are learning.

## EVERY CHILD READY INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL



### CURRICULUM

(What to Teach):  
Robust research and standards-based curricula



### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

(How to Teach):  
Dynamic instructional and classroom management competencies



### ASSESSMENT

(How to Tell It's Working):  
Personalized assessments to improve effectiveness in teaching and learning



## *Every Child Ready* Instructional Model

Designed according to rigorous research and tested with the support of the highly selective federal Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) grant, *Every Child Ready* draws from existing research on effective, quality childhood education as well as AppleTree’s own in-classroom experience in running preschools for children from under-resourced families. *Every Child Ready* is focused on teachers, providing them with lessons, tools, professional development and technology to deliver highly personalized instruction to preschool (3-year-old) and pre-K (4-year-old) children.

The *Every Child Ready* instructional model provides 10 three-week units that explore fun and engaging themes, such as stars and planets, animals and plants, and the human body. This includes curriculum that is critical to helping children develop social and emotional skills and behaviors they need to succeed in life. Designed to close the achievement gap between at-risk 3- and 4-year-old children and their more-advantaged peers, *Every Child Ready* has helped children in early grades perform as well or better on average than their peers on early vocabulary, literacy and

math skills. Success in these areas has been shown to lower high school dropout rates, behavior issues, crime and unemployment.

The *Every Child Ready* instructional model is adapted to each child and uses data to empower teachers to understand the impact of their teaching and how to tailor it to better reach struggling students. Lydia Carlis, former Chief of Research and Innovation at AppleTree, said that *Every Child Ready* was built on AppleTree’s value of continuous improvement – constantly identifying and responding to gaps or needs in students’ education. For example, “One of the first projects that we tackled when developing *Every Child Ready* was figuring out which books to include in the curriculum,” said Lydia. “We didn’t find any high-quality books on our subject areas that were written for our students’ age range or any that represented people of color. So we thought, ‘Why don’t we just write our own books?’ And we did.”

The assessments that are a part of *Every Child Ready* are also driven by AppleTree’s belief in the importance of continuous improvement

because they constantly measure student performance at the classroom level, providing teachers with frequent, practical feedback about student progress. This also supports teacher professional development by identifying strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities for coaching and additional training.

Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP) shares a common goal with AppleTree of transforming the lives of vulnerable children in the region so they can lead happy and healthy lives. When VPP identified AppleTree as an organization that was rooted in strong student learning outcomes, it also recognized that AppleTree's *Every Child Ready* instructional model could help improve early childhood education throughout Greater Washington. This marked the beginning of a partnership that would establish a strong foundation for AppleTree's growth.

## The Opportunity

### The Big Picture

Every year, about four million children enter kindergarten in the United States. Unfortunately, many of those children – particularly those from low-income families – don't have access to high-quality early learning opportunities to prepare them for success in kindergarten and beyond. Numerous studies have shown that high-quality early education can have a significant impact on the cognitive, linguistic, physical and socio-emotional development of children. But without that opportunity, many children from low-income families enter kindergarten significantly behind their peers – a pattern that can persist throughout their entire school life.

As consensus grew in the 2000s about the importance of quality early education, states across the country began to prioritize the issue. Washington, D.C., quickly emerged as a leader within the national landscape. In 2008 D.C. began offering universal pre-K, and over time early childhood education became the center of the city's reform agenda, emphasizing the importance of universal access to quality preschool programs for all D.C. children. This helped to create an environment where early learning became a priority and influenced the way communities started to think about quality early education. Now, D.C. serves the highest percentage of 3-year-olds (70 percent) and 4-year-olds (80 percent) nationally.





## An Opportunity for Growth

For over two decades, AppleTree has been an innovator in early childhood education. AppleTree serves the District’s most vulnerable children with free, full-day education. It intervenes at a critical time in a child’s life to remove barriers to education and creates a path for success at every stage and phase of early learning. Many children enter AppleTree with significant deficits in language, literacy and math skills. But after going through preschool at AppleTree, students make significant gains.

This focus on high-quality early education also exists within a broader context: Birth rates in the District of Columbia continued to increase during AppleTree’s early years, as did the demand for public school–based early development programs with high standards for K–12 readiness. With

the demand for preschool classroom seats on the minds of government officials, education providers and families throughout D.C., AppleTree had the opportunity to position itself as a high-quality early education provider and, thus, to fulfill its mission.

VPP’s investment partnership with AppleTree began at an inflection point when AppleTree was poised to reach new heights and to serve more children with high-quality education. VPP selected AppleTree as an investment partner because of the organization’s bold aspiration to scale its impact, the CEO’s inspiring vision, *Every Child Ready’s* demonstrated performance in achieving significant outcomes for vulnerable children, and its willingness to build capacity that would transform the organization.

*“We were looking for an organization that had significant achievements and measurable results for improving the lives of children through early education, and we could see that AppleTree was building their organization to do just that.”*

**CAROL THOMPSON COLE, PRESIDENT AND CEO, VPP**

# The Action

VPP began working with AppleTree in late 2012 to build the organization’s internal capacity and refine, complete and disseminate its *Every Child Ready* instructional model in the region. The three-year, \$3.2 million investment began with AppleTree working with McKinsey & Company to develop a business plan. VPP funded the business planning process to help AppleTree develop a clear, compelling plan for growth and expanded influence.

## Investment Breakdown

The business planning process brought out three important areas that would become the focus of VPP’s investment in AppleTree:

- **Strengthening the Organizational Structure:**  
As AppleTree expanded the number of children it served, the organization needed to develop a more efficient and sustainable operating structure, as well as new leadership roles and capacities.
- **Expanding Access to High-Quality Education:**  
AppleTree needed to complete its *Every Child Ready* instructional model and

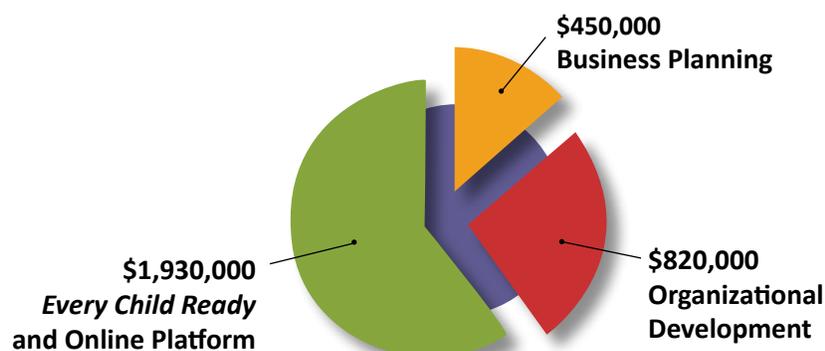
*“Before the investment, our plan was to educate kids in our schools, promote a relationship where we consult with other schools, and figure out how to export the program. VPP helped us bring this forward through the business plan and articulate how many more students we should be educating.”*

**CELIA MARTIN, APPLETREE BOARD CHAIR**

enhance its delivery so that teachers, principals and instructional coaches could make better use of its capacity to integrate and analyze data. When the entire instructional model is implemented, it provides real-time information on what children are learning and identifies which supports children need in order to advance their learning.

- **Developing a New Model for Expansion:**  
To expand and reach more children with its *Every Child Ready* instructional model, AppleTree needed to identify the best route to sustainable growth: new schools, a type of partnership, or both.

## INVESTMENT SNAPSHOT 2012 – 2017 \$3.2 MILLION TOTAL





## The Results

### A Strengthened Organizational Structure

When AppleTree and VPP began their partnership, one of the main goals was to enhance AppleTree’s internal capacity. This was a critical foundation that would allow the organization to successfully scale up over time. VPP’s funding helped achieve this goal by supporting AppleTree in refining its staff structure and building internal capacity to implement a more efficient operating model.

### Organizational Structure

VPP’s investment helped AppleTree establish a development department that is now staffed with a Chief of Development and a Grants Manager. Creating this department increased the organization’s capacity to source and cultivate potential donors and to manage the funds raised. Investing in an experienced development staff helped AppleTree to exceed its goal of securing \$2 million in financial commitments and to raise more than \$6 million in philanthropic donations during the investment period. VPP’s investment

*“VPP upped the game substantially for AppleTree by bringing a unique and strategic approach to the table. The partnership catalyzed AppleTree to examine how to accomplish goals and scale with sustainability.”*

**CAROLYN LEONARD, PH.D., VPP REPRESENTATIVE TO APPLETREE INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION INNOVATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

also helped support the addition of other key staff positions, including Chief Academic Officer, Chief Financial Officer and Director of Strategic Partnerships.

### Financial Sustainability

During the rigorous business planning process, AppleTree’s leadership recognized that they needed to reform parts of their financial model to sustain the organization in the future. The result of the business planning process was the AppleTree@ model for expansion, which reduces financial risk, increases financial stability and uses a more efficient staffing model.



## VPP'S INVESTMENT: BEFORE & AFTER

Number of Students Served Through Different Program Models - 58% increase over 3 years

BEFORE	AFTER
Partners using full ECR model: <b>380 students</b>	Partners using full ECR model: <b>616 students</b>
Charter schools: <b>639 students</b>	Charter schools: <b>633 students</b>
AppleTree@: <b>0 students</b>	AppleTree@: <b>495 students</b>
<b>Students Served: 1,019 students</b>	<b>Students Served: 1,744 students</b>

### Expanded Access to High-Quality Education

From the beginning, AppleTree has focused on delivering strong outcomes for students and families. As AppleTree sought to increase the utilization of its instructional model to improve early childhood education throughout the Washington, D.C., region and beyond, AppleTree and VPP recognized that the real-time information about what students were learning through *Every Child Ready* was a primary driver of the positive outcomes.

*Every Child Ready* comprises three related components: curriculum, assessments and professional development. Together, they provide teachers with guidance on what to teach, how to teach and how to know if what is taught is being learned. The business planning process highlighted AppleTree's need to refine the *Every Child Ready* instructional model and tools to support further growth and long-term success within its own schools and partner schools. To build upon the effectiveness of the instructional model, AppleTree needed to:

- Improve usability.
- Expand functionality.
- Refine components of the curriculum.
- Place the model on a more robust online platform.

VPP's investment allowed AppleTree to refine, complete and codify their instructional model and develop a robust online delivery platform to support their growth plans for the region.

### Refining the Instructional Model

The *Every Child Ready* instructional model was developed as a three-tiered model designed to reach a broad spectrum of children who enter school with varying levels of language, cognitive and socio-emotional skills. At the beginning of the investment, Tier I, which is designed to reach

*“Enrolling my daughter Abria in AppleTree was the best decision I’ve ever made. The Every Child Ready model was just what she needed. I’m thankful that Abria had the opportunity to receive this kind of education, especially the first phase, Getting Ready to Learn, which focuses on socio-emotional development. It’s amazing how they’ve incorporated that part into the curriculum to make sure that children understand everything they need to – that is what really makes a difference in kindergarten and beyond.”*

**LAJOY JOHNSON-LAW, PARENT AND BOARD MEMBER OF APPLE TREE INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION INNOVATION AND APPLE TREE EARLY LEARNING PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL**

approximately 80–85 percent, was in place. VPP’s investment enabled Apple Tree to complete Tiers 2 and 3, which provide additional supports to children with documented learning differences, in order to enhance their learning and help them perform at a level that is appropriate for their age. To strengthen teachers’ effectiveness, AppleTree developed a large collection of videos demonstrating how to teach a variety of concepts (for example, rhyming) embedded in the curriculum. VPP’s investment enabled AppleTree to achieve its goal to create more videos for each of the three curriculum tiers and to catalogue and store them in a presentation bank that allows teachers to easily find sample lessons that can increase their effectiveness.

## Building a Robust Online Platform

During business planning, VPP discovered that the online tools AppleTree was using to deliver *Every Child Ready*, while comprehensive, relied on a combination of open-source software programs that didn’t allow for seamless integration. As a result, teachers had to sign in and out of different programs to access the curriculum, assessments and professional development data and tools they needed. In addition, some data needed to be entered by hand, which was time-consuming and vulnerable to human error. While AppleTree’s technology staff had fully mastered the online platform, producing intricate reports and analyses of student and teacher performance, VPP recognized that the current platform had been extended as far as it could go and that AppleTree needed a new stable and reliable platform with greater functionality to support not only AppleTree’s current volume, but also its aspirations for growth. With support from VPP and outside consultants, AppleTree oversaw the development of the product roadmap, online strategy and user-centered design approach for the *Every Child Ready* online delivery platform.

Tarek Rizk, Senior Director of Content Services at Connections Media, was part of the consulting team working with VPP and AppleTree. As Tarek described, “We needed to migrate *Every Child Ready* to a custom, robust online platform so that AppleTree could scale up and continue to deliver their model productively. VPP was valuable in making AppleTree aware of the importance of this project and helping to map it all out.” As a result of this engagement with VPP, AppleTree completed the first phase of bringing to life the new online platform for *Every Child Ready*.

Continuous improvement is a key element of AppleTree’s approach to the *Every Child Ready* instructional model. Teacher feedback and student assessment data helped them identify the need for a tool that enables teachers to provide students with differentiated instruction in small groups, as needed, and to more easily shuffle groupings as students improve their skills. The solution was the creation of the Flexible Small Group (FSG) application. Teachers use the online app to enter student data in real time, and they then receive information on how to place students with similar strengths and challenges into small groups. Previously, AppleTree teachers created groups by doing their own analysis of performance monitoring spreadsheets. This new approach enables AppleTree to provide real-time solutions that maximize a teacher’s planning time and enhance student learning. VPP’s investment supported the development of the FSG app and its integration into the technology platform, which lets teachers access the tool through multiple devices.

## Developing a New Model for Expansion

AppleTree successfully launched a new model for expansion, AppleTree@. The idea

for collaboration through AppleTree@ schools emerged during the business planning phase of VPP's investment. Through this innovative model, AppleTree is able to expand to new locations in the city without bearing the costs of building and maintaining new facilities, by integrating AppleTree schools into new or existing elementary schools. To date, the AppleTree@ partnership model has been developed in collaboration with other charter schools. Current partners include Achievement Prep Wahler Place Elementary School, Democracy Prep Congress Heights Elementary, Perry Street Preparatory Public Charter School and Rocketship Rise Academy Public Charter School. The AppleTree@ partnership model also has the potential to be adapted to traditional public schools.

The AppleTree@ model blends and aligns organizational processes, schedules and culture between AppleTree and the partner school. The two also align learning goals and expectations for the AppleTree 4-year-olds who transition into the partner school's kindergarten classrooms. VPP's investment enabled AppleTree to develop a detailed framework for evaluating potential AppleTree@ partnerships and for guiding and supporting the integration process. AppleTree has learned that the integration process, especially the blending and aligning of cultures, is a multi-year endeavor: it takes significant time, effort, patience and trust that must be developed among the parties.

AppleTree@ partnerships put families at ease because their children gain access to high-quality preschool and elementary education from two leading educational providers without having to re-enter D.C.'s charter school lottery. This innovative partnership addresses the concern expressed by families about where children go when they leave AppleTree's charter school. Anne Malone, Chief of Schools at AppleTree, shared that this approach further positioned AppleTree to make a long-term difference in students' lives. "We've expanded our potential to make a greater impact on our youth because of AppleTree@," she said. "The model fulfills our desire to want to educate students at every grade level, while allowing us and our partners to do what we each do best." The AppleTree@ model also enabled AppleTree to expand its presence in Ward 8, a D.C. community characterized by the low educational attainment of children and adults, by opening AppleTree@Achievement Prep Wahler Place Elementary School and AppleTree@Rocketship Rise.





## Vision for the Future

### Growth in the District

Looking toward the future, AppleTree hopes to continue to reach children from under-resourced families and set them on a path to be successful throughout their education. With the desire to grow and expand their footprint in D.C.'s communities with high need, AppleTree recently pursued an opportunity to partner with THEARC (Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus), which is located in Ward 8 and provides underserved families with an array of comprehensive programs and services. As part of THEARC's expansion in 2017, AppleTree will relocate its headquarters there, allowing the entire enterprise (AppleTree Institute, AppleTree's charter school administrative team, and AppleTree's management team) to be housed in a single location with shared space. In addition to facilitating more informal communication among its respective teams, AppleTree will have space to conduct its teacher trainings, along with dedicated classroom space to educate up to 80 3- and 4-year-olds. The partnership with THEARC gives AppleTree more capacity to monitor, modify and strengthen the *Every Child Ready* instructional model in its pursuit to provide high-quality early learning.

### A New Educational Standard and a Nationally Expanding Reach

Research has shown that when children who are significantly behind more-advantaged peers are taught using the *Every Child Ready* instructional model, they make substantial gains in language, literacy and socio-emotional skills. This fact demonstrates the power of *Every Child Ready's* ability to close the achievement gap. AppleTree aspires to be a thought leader, advancing high-quality early learning policy and practice to the forefront of local and national discussions about universal preschool, especially for underserved children.

National organizations and news outlets have taken notice of AppleTree's innovative approach to early education, further developed during VPP's investment. AppleTree has been highlighted by The University of Pennsylvania's Center for High Impact Philanthropy, the Pioneer Institute, The 74, the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, the National Council on Teaching Quality and EducationNext. Libby Doggett, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Policy and Learning with the U.S. Department of Education explained why she thinks AppleTree benefits children: "AppleTree has

the results. Not only do they use evidence-based programs, they evaluate them and use what they learn for quality continuous improvement. You could be assured that if your child goes to AppleTree, they're going to get quality education."

AppleTree's growing national recognition has helped to expand its reach beyond the region. Its first foray into supporting *Every Child Ready* beyond the District's borders began when a former AppleTree teacher moved to New York City. Over the past few years, that same teacher has remained in partnership with AppleTree, continuing to use the *Every Child Ready* instructional model with her students at Harlem's DREAM Academy. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Education awarded Legacy Charter School network in South Carolina a Pay for Success grant to adopt the *Every Child Ready* instructional model. AppleTree regularly receives inquiries about potential partnerships from individual schools, charter management organizations and state education systems. The new technology platform developed with VPP's investment is providing AppleTree with the capacity it needs to support its expansion in the region. It was also designed with AppleTree's future growth in mind and can continue to be scaled up to provide greater capacity and functionality.

Evidence shows that high-quality early childhood learning programs like AppleTree see an increase in school achievement, income and better health and a decrease in unemployment. Research also suggests that expanding high-quality early learning provides society with a return of nearly \$10 per every \$1 spent.

There is no doubt that AppleTree's presence is vitally important in creating a better future for the young people in the District. When we sow the seeds for high-quality early education, we see growth in our communities and our economy, but most importantly, in our children's lives. AppleTree gives students a chance to thrive. With partners like AppleTree, VPP is optimistic about being able to remove barriers and open pathways for children in the District because they deserve nothing less.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF APPLETREE IN OUR CHILDREN'S FUTURES

The Progression of a Child's Life with High-Quality Early Education



### YOUNG CHILD (3–4 YEARS OLD)

Receives high-quality early childhood education, such as with the *Every Child Ready* instructional model



### OLDER CHILD (5–15 YEARS)

Succeeds and performs the same or better than peers in elementary and middle school



### YOUNG ADULT (18–24)

Graduates from high school, makes plans for college and career



### ADULT (25+)

Develops successful career and sustainable income, becomes healthy and happy adult



Venture  
Philanthropy  
Partners

[www.vppartners.org](http://www.vppartners.org)