

BILL: House Bill 1455
TITLE: Public Prekindergarten and Child Care Providers – Waiver Action Plan and Assistance Hubs
DATE: March 6, 2024
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
CONTACT: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) opposes House Bill 1455 as an enormous unfunded mandate for both the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and all local school systems by mandating a new statewide system of resources intended to assist potential private providers of publicly funded prekindergarten. In addition, the bill would inappropriately interfere with the comprehensive Blueprint implementation planning, reporting, and accountability system by imposing yet another unfunded mandate on local school systems to develop action plans to achieve the arbitrary statutory goal of 50% of publicly funded prekindergarten slots being provided by private providers beginning in the 2026-2027 school year.

Legislation to alter certain provisions of the Blueprint has been enacted every year since 2021, including amendments to the phase-in and funding for full-day prekindergarten. MABE has supported these efforts, but strongly opposes the provisions of House Bill 1455 to expand the scope of the state and local school system responsibilities to facilitate the decisions of private providers to participate in the publicly funded program.

To be clear, MABE has always been a leading advocate for expanding state investment in enrollment-based prekindergarten programs in all 24 school systems. The Blueprint contains within its first set of policy and funding initiatives, under Pillar 1, the following:

- A significant expansion of full-day prekindergarten (pre-K), to be free for all low-income 3- and 4-year-olds and available to all other 4-year-olds with fees set at a sliding scale, so that all children have the opportunity to begin kindergarten ready to learn;
- Public funding for both public-school based and community-based pre-K programs, with all providers receiving public funding required to meet rigorous quality standards;
- A substantial increase in the supply of early childhood education teachers through tuition assistance and financial support for those pursuing credentials and degrees; and
- An expansion of both Family Support Centers for pre- and post-natal support and Judy Centers for early childhood education and family support; and full funding of the Infants and Toddlers Program to identify early and provide supports to young children with disabilities.

The prekindergarten expansion envisioned by the Blueprint is, and will continue to be, an enormous undertaking involving short and long-term planning to address staffing full-day programs with highly qualified teachers and aides, and planning, designing and constructing the major renovations and new prekindergarten classrooms and facilities. Again, MABE and local school boards are committed to this work. At the same time, there is growing awareness, as evidenced by several pieces of legislation pending in 2024, that the program and staffing standards, and the economics of privately operated early education businesses, are not coalescing in the manner expected by the Kirwan Commission and Blueprint law to provide remotely close to 50% of eligible PreK slots in private settings.

As unfortunate as this is, it must not become the rationale for imposing more administrative, accounting, and legal responsibilities on local school systems to develop yet another plan describing matters largely outside their control. And MSDE should not be mandated to build a statewide network of private prekindergarten service centers, especially at a time when state resources to implement the Blueprint are still in their early stages and in peril in the coming fiscal years.

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future law establishes the Publicly Funded Full-Day Prekindergarten Program to eventually guarantee the availability of slots in public schools or private facilities at no cost for three-year-olds and four-year-olds from families with incomes up to 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL) and for four-year-olds from families with incomes between 300% and 600% FPL using a sliding scale (Md. Code Ann., Ed. Art. § 7-1A-01). Under the Blueprint, once fully implemented, all three and four year old children should benefit from a robust mixed delivery system of high quality early education and full-day prekindergarten programs. MABE recognizes that the road to success will involve adjustments along the way. However, MABE does not believe that the initiatives proposed in House Bill 1455 should be enacted as newly mandated programs, services and accountability measures in addition to those already included in the Blueprint.

For these reasons, MABE urges an unfavorable report on House Bill 1455.