



March 27, 2024

HB 1441

Education – Blueprint for Maryland’s Future – Alterations

**Senate Education, Energy & the Environment Committee
Senate Budget & Taxation Committee**

Position: INFORMATION w/ Amendment

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this informational testimony with amendments to House Bill 1441. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals and numerous charities combine to form our state’s second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

As written, House Bill 1441 bolsters the prekindergarten workforce, provides alternative pathways to certification, establishes support systems for community-based providers, and invests in programs that nurture our diverse childcare workforce. House Bill 1441 proactively insures the success of a mixed-delivery system of prekindergarten by utilizing Maryland’s vast resources for high-quality prekindergarten in its private provider network and removing barriers faced by private providers. These measures will result in more prekindergarten teachers and substantial increases in prekindergarten slots across every district in Maryland.

A major component of the Blueprint legislation, which was supported by the Conference, provides that 50% of prekindergarten expansion slots be provided through private prekindergarten providers. This legislation as amended by the House helps to ensure that crucial provision is retained, for which we are thankful.

However, a major barrier that prevents a dearth of very high-quality prekindergarten programs from applying for expansion sites is the prohibition against anything “explicitly religious” in the Blueprint prekindergarten provisions. This is often not because schools intend to proselytize, but because they are afraid that incidental or engrained elements of their programs will be questioned or compromised.

The goal is to provide high-quality education and if the state wants to spur increased involvement from private providers, those provisions should be struck from the law. **Thus, we respectfully request an amendment to the same effect, as listed below. Based on recent case law precedent, such an amendment would be fully constitutional, alleviate any challenges**

to the unconstitutionality of the current prohibitive provisions, and would open up a number of high-quality expansion site applicants.

Nonpublic school prekindergarten providers have received mixed- delivery prekindergarten expansion grant sites in the first round of expansion in 2022, winning competitive grant bids for programs to provide prekindergarten to four-year-old children whose family income is 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL) or lower. Nonpublic providers have the capacity to offer high quality seats at our programs and are enthused to continue to partner with the state of Maryland in advancing the educational vision of the Kirwan Commission through mixed-delivery prekindergarten expansions.

These sites include Catholic schools who are partnering with the State of Maryland to provide high-quality prekindergarten to low-income students. Catholic providers have long participated in and supported prekindergarten expansion in Maryland. All three of (arch)dioceses serving Maryland have a strong commitment to education. Within the State of Maryland, there are approximately 120 prekindergarten programs in Catholic schools or parishes, in addition to Headstart programs. Nearly all are accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by MSDE and a vast majority of them employ state-certified prekindergarten teachers. However, some added flexibility for expansion sites would certainly accelerate Maryland's ambitions prekindergarten expansion goals.

A strong prekindergarten education has been proven to greatly enhance a child's educational trajectory. Like early childhood care, it is also an essential component to supporting strong, economically secure families. Prekindergarten availability also helps to empower working parents with workplace access, an imperative part of combating poverty.

We respectfully urge the following amendments to House Bill 1441:

Amendments to House Bill 1441

Amendment No. 1

On the reprint, strike in the entirety from page 10, line 27 all the way through page 11, line 5.