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BILL: HB 1441
TITLE: Early Childhood Education - Publicly Funded Prekindergarten
Programs - Alterations
DATE: February 26, 2024
POSITION: Favorable with Amendments
COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means Committee
CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, PSSAM

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four Maryland local school superintendents, **supports** House Bill 1441 with **amendments**.

This bill makes numerous changes related to publicly funded prekindergarten programs, including adjusting staff credentials, altering slot allocations for providers, mandating educator development programs, requiring agreements between local boards and relevant agencies, authorizing space leasing, introducing support initiatives, and extending funding timelines for grant programs

One of the bedrocks of The Blueprint for Maryland's Future is the expansion of public and private prekindergarten programs. In fact, the expansion of seats and increases in Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) scores have been one of the most celebrated early victories in many school systems.

PSSAM deeply appreciates the sponsor's comprehensive efforts to address many of the implementation challenges we have identified. We hope to continue an open dialogue with the sponsor and the subcommittee as they work through this legislation, and consider our feedback and proposed amendments.

Staff Qualifications for Pre Kindergarten - Under this bill, in order to receive a Prekindergarten Expansion Grant, a prekindergarten provider must have at least one teacher with an associate's degree in early childhood education or development, rather than meeting the current requirement to have at least one teacher certified in early childhood development.

The bill also repeals the requirement that all specified prekindergarten providers have specified high staff qualifications for teachers and teaching assistants by the 2027-2028 school year. Instead, by the 2025-2026 school year, a teacher or teaching assistant must meet the following: (1) hold at least an associate's degree in early childhood education or child development, or (2) from July 1, 2025, through June 30, 2027, meet specific experience and training requirements; and (3) to qualify as a teaching assistant in a prekindergarten classroom, an individual must hold a CDA certificate, as specified, or from July 1, 2025, through June 30, 2027, meet specific experience and training requirements.

We are extremely cognizant of the shortage of private providers and teachers who meet the qualification of the Prekindergarten Expansion Grant. However, we are equally concerned about ensuring the appropriate level of academic and professional learning for PreK students. We believe the legislation swings too far in the opposite direction and strongly urge the committee to expand current programs that are supporting and inducting providers and teachers, rather than lowering the standards for acceptance into the publicly funded program.

We support amending this legislation to allow for another option for teacher preparation that recognizes the value and institutional knowledge of teacher assistants in prekindergarten. We hope the Legislature can support and recognize the importance of these paraprofessionals and consider an alternative approach for pre-K paraeducators, commensurate with their years of experience. We support amendments put forth by the Baltimore City Public Schools that the requirement for a CDA and/or an Associates Degree are not applicable for teaching assistants with 15 years experience. We would further support language that this experience is accompanied by favorable job performance evaluations. Additionally, we believe the current provision in law that allows assistants to have an associate's degree in any subject area remains without the additional credentials needed by the 2025-2026 school year.

Funding

We strongly support the funding extensions for various programs, but especially for the Prekindergarten Expansion Grant Program that must be consolidated into the publicly funded full-day prekindergarten program from fiscal 2026 to 2028.

Experience-based Educator Professional Development Program - this legislation provides that each local board of education must establish an experience-based educator professional development program. The purpose of the program is to assist experience-based educators in obtaining a CDA certificate within a three-year period, operating from July 1, 2025, through June 30, 2030.

PSSAM is opposed to the increase in responsibility for providing these experience-based professional development programs, especially for the private workforce. This is a major extension of our mission, and funding, for public education. While we strongly support prekindergarten, the extended responsibilities outlined in this program go well beyond the current funding model, or available workforce and opportunities to implement such a program. If this was a program created, funded and supported by the Maryland Department of Education's Early Childhood Division, we can envision a partnership, but to take on the full responsibility of this with existing staff and resources for most districts without any programs, is improbable.

Proportion of Slots Provided by Private Providers - The bill repeals the phased-in requirement for local boards of education to ensure that a certain proportion of eligible prekindergarten slots in each county are provided by private providers. The bill also repeals the related waiver process. Instead, the legislation establishes that it is the goal of the State that at least 50% of the prekindergarten slots provided in each county be provided by eligible private providers beginning in the 2027-2028 school year.

While we would love to share the equal responsibility of educating pre kindergarteners with the private sector, the existing goal is already extremely aspirational. Removing the waiver also seems premature and does not recognize that there are very legitimate reasons why individual school systems may not be able to meet this threshold, including strong and historical existing partnerships between schools systems and Head Start and Infants and Toddlers that would presumably have to move students from existing public to private programs. Or, school systems that already serve the vast majority of 4 year olds already, and have been, prior to the enactment of the Blueprint. Again, the ideal of a mixed delivery system is wonderful and in the best interest of public schools. But these new provisions are not going to help us achieve the goals of the Blueprint.

For these reasons, PSSAM **supports** House Bill 1441 and requests a **favorable with amendments** report.