



February 22, 2024

Testimony Concerning House Bill 1441 – Early Childhood Education - Publicly Funded Prekindergarten Programs - Alterations

We urge you to support House Bill 1441 – Early Childhood Education – Publicly Funded Prekindergarten Programs – Alterations. The *Blueprint for Maryland's Future* is a laudable and transformative legislation that shows true investment in our youngest citizens through Pillar 1. We believe that a mixed-delivery Pre-K system, that involves both public schools and private community-based child care providers, is needed to make high quality early childhood education available to the 3 and 4 year olds who need it the most.

Montgomery County has the most Pre-K seats in community-based seats across the state. This year we have 208 seats in 7 child care centers and 5 family child care homes (through the Family Child Care Alliance of MD). In order to reach the goals of serving all Tier 1 three- and four-year-olds and all Tier 2 four-year-olds while meeting the 50/50 ratio goal, we estimate that there will need to be over 6,600 seats. We have a long way to go to be able to meet this goal.

However, the model as it exists today for private community-based providers to apply to the Maryland State Department of Education to receive Pre-K grants does not currently work for the majority of private providers in our community. The Children's Opportunity Alliance interviewed child care center directors across the county to hear their perceptions about this opportunity. What we heard through these interviews was a resounding chorus that A) the current eligibility requirements are completely unrealistic for providers to be able to meet, and B) the reimbursement rate per pupil does not cover the true cost of quality care.

The largest barrier for providers to be eligible is the requirements for teacher education. The Pre-K grants require lead teachers to possess a P-3 certification, or to hold a bachelor's degree and be enrolled in an alternative certification program. Soon, assistant teachers will need to have a CDA or associate degree.

We heard the following statements from child care center directors:

- "We're all in agreement that this [Blueprint Pre-K expansion] is important to provide a greater number of children the opportunity to be in preschool. The teacher certification is a real barrier. We run several locations of centers with high quality staff who are excellent at what they do and ensuring young children enter Kindergarten ready to learn; however, we don't meet the eligibility requirements for the Pre-K grants because we just don't have staff with those certifications."





- “We have zero staff with a CDA. And we have probably 3% of staff with some kind of degree. The rest are all qualified to be teachers through the 90-hour coursework required by Maryland. It’s already proven to be extremely challenging to hire early educators with these qualifications, let alone certified teachers.”
- “There was a point where we had three teachers doing their practicum and getting ready to get the certification. Two things happened: one, they got their certification and they moved on to public schools, and two, it was too overwhelming and after trying to complete it, one said, 'I can't do this, this is too much' and she left.”

We need to make alterations to these requirements if we truly want private community-based providers to be eligible for the Pre-K grants. And we need the private community-based providers to get these grants if we truly want to have enough Pre-K seats to meet the needs of working families in our community.

Inequitable access to early care and education impacts the entire community – parents, employers, providers. Improving access to high-quality early education makes a significant impact on the lives of young children, both short and long term, with improved outcomes in education, physical and mental health, employment, and public safety. By addressing the opportunity gap that currently exists for young children from low-income families, we can create a more equitable early childhood system that will have lasting intergenerational benefits.

Submitted on behalf of the Children’s Opportunity Alliance.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laura Jahromi". The signature is fluid and cursive.

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