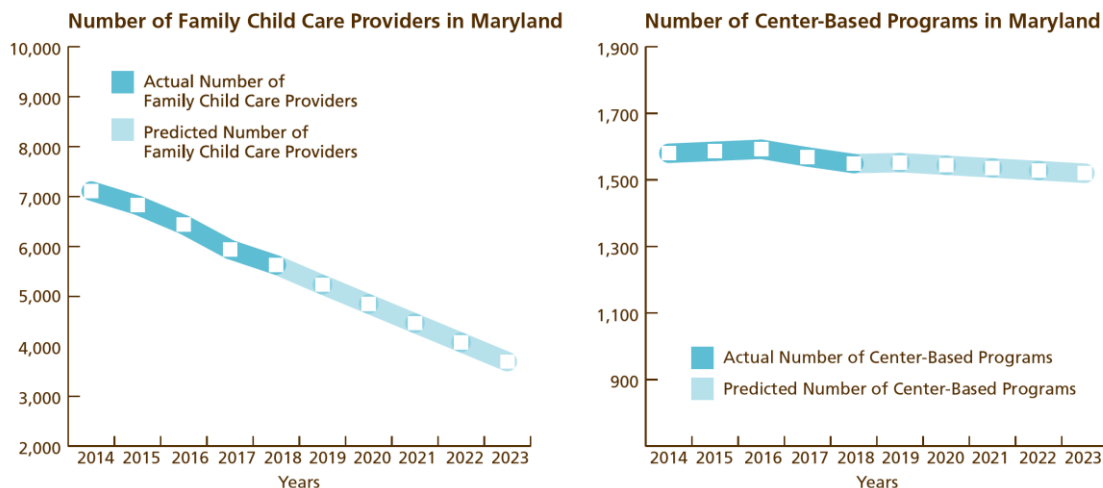




Senate Education, Health, & Environmental Affairs Committee
 Senator Paul G. Pinsky, Chair
 General Assembly of Maryland
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How many child care providers will there be in Maryland in the future?



Children in the 0-4 age group are projected to **increase by about 15.8%** from 2019 to 2023. Meanwhile the number of licensed family care providers is projected to **decrease by 29%** while the number of child care centers is projected to **decrease by 2%**. -Trends in Child Care 2019, p.3, Maryland Family Network

SB1018 Child Care Centers - Employee Qualifications - Requirements and Application Review - SUPPORT

Dear Senator Pinsky,

I write to express my support for HB0396. The intent and effect of this bill are to create more reasonable pathways & procedures for quality child care staff to be hired, trained and evaluated. It's important because the number of child care providers is shrinking and it is becoming more and more difficult to find quality staff to hire to work with our children. This bill also brings some much needed accountability to the Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE's) Office of Child Care (OCC).

For the past 15 years, I have been involved in child care and early childhood development as both a parent and then as the president of Rock Spring Children's Center. Rock Spring is a nonprofit child care & preschool facility that attempts to meet the needs of the families and children in our community with spots for 176 infants through pre-k children. As a former representative of child care providers in both elected and appointed capacities, I have testified regularly about the critical need for more resources to better support parental needs for quality child care, to bolster & expand child care businesses, and to improve the wages of child care workers.

It is not widely understood that we have a child care crisis that has been building for years and that we have no comprehensive plan to fix. You can see from the chart at the top of my testimony that Maryland has had sharp declines in the number of licensed family child care providers. Behind the more moderate declining trend in the numbers of licensed center based programs are alarming warning signs – an aging group of providers and staff anxiously hoping to just make it to retirement, child care businesses struggling to make their budgets work, staff shortages with a lack of younger people entering the field, and a sense that those of us who work in child care need to be making backup plans for alternate livelihoods.

It is against this backdrop that the importance of HB1386 should be gauged.

The first part of this bill would expand the pool of potential child care teachers by allowing child care programs to hire staff who have degrees as lead teachers provided they obtain the necessary 90 hours of child care specific training during their first 6 months of hire. It is important because the most important factor in the quality of a child care teacher is their ability to connect with kids and engage with parents. The current system encourages child care programs to hire anyone who they can find to ensure they are in compliance with the regulations regarding the number of staff you need. It also discourages dismissal of a teacher who demonstrates over time that they are not well suited to working with young children.

Similarly, the second part of this bill gives 90 days for newly hired staff to take required trainings after being hired. This also gives a child care program more flexibility to hire people who will work well with young children and gives a certain amount of time after hire to decide whether the new hire is suited to the position. The current system requires an upfront investment of time and resources in the new hire that then discourages dismissal after a probationary period if there are doubts about how well that new hire is connecting with the children. In addition, the training becomes much more meaningful when the new hire is working in a classroom and has more concrete experiences from which to draw.

Finally, **the most impactful part of this bill would bring accountability to MSDE/OCC which has been dysfunctional for many years.** When a child care program hires a new staff member, it must submit paperwork to OCC to initiate a review of the new hire and issuance by OCC of a Personnel Qualification Evaluation (PQE). The PQE certifies what positions OCC will allow the new hire to work. For example, OCC could determine that the new

hire is only qualified as an aide rather than a full teacher because they are missing some required training or other requirement.

When I was an elected representative of child care providers for the Maryland State Child Care Association, one of the concerns providers raised most often to me is how long it would take for OCC to complete the PQE process. We discussed this with the long time OCC Director at the time, and she said that in most cases, the process should only take a couple of days and that we should let her know if it was taking longer than a week or two. Unfortunately, she retired not long after and while there was initially some improvement, things have reverted and even gotten worse since then with **PQEs for some providers taking weeks, months, even years.**

My program had the experience several years ago of hiring a teacher with a master's degree in special education. We evaluated her as meeting all of the qualifications for a lead preschool teacher and we put her into that position in our program. Over two years later, OCC finally issued her PQE and qualified her merely as an aide stating that some of her coursework for her master's degree did not properly align with all of OCC's requirements. The teacher ended up leaving the profession as she had two small children and was not going to get more coursework and was not going to work in the field as an aide.

It's also important to note **that the delay in PQEs can cause significant economic damage to child care workers.** Most programs cannot afford to pay a staff member for a role for which they have not yet been qualified by OCC. So, if for example, a child care aide gets all of their trainings & qualifications to be a teacher and submits this evidence to OCC, and OCC takes a year to complete the PQE, that teacher can lose out on a full year's worth of pay increases and credentialing bonuses to which they are entitled. This can amount to thousands of dollars a year which is significant in a profession with such low pay (\$18k avg for aides & \$25k for teachers).

In reviewing the Fiscal and Policy note for this bill, some of OCC's dysfunction is revealed as reflected by the comment "due to the lack of additional information regarding how MSDE derived its estimate, including the average time it currently takes to review applications for child care center employees, DLS is unable at this time to independently verify the specific staffing needs and associated costs." In other words, **DLS cannot verify how many additional staff it would take to speed up the PQE process to 14 days because MSDE can't even tell how long it currently takes them to do it.**

This fact was revealed in the September 2019 Audit Report of MSDE's Division of Early Childhood conducted by the Office of Legislative Audits (OLA) which notes that MSDE/OCC doesn't even log the date it receives initial paperwork from providers and thus has no way to know how long the processing of background checks (and thus also PQEs) is taking. It only tracks the date when the licensing specialist gets around to entering the information into their computer system, which can be weeks or months after it was received. Providers are routinely

asked over and over to submit and resubmit the same information because OCC has lost it. OCC uses a computer system called CCATS that seems to be a source of great inefficiency and never seems to have worked correctly, but no one has ever explained why and no one has ever been held accountable. This raises the question of whether MSDE's assertion that it would need more staff to meet the 14 day PQE deadline is factual or whether it is simply an issue of poor management and inefficient use of resources.

Another example of the frustration and dysfunction with MSDE/OCC could be seen at the Joint Committee on Administrative, Executive, and Legislative Review (AELR) hearing on child care regulations. Senator Kagan raised the OLA audit issue and the length of time it takes OCC to issue PQEs. Senator Kagan and Delegate Reznick pressed the issue trying to get a straight answer out of OCC as to how long it should take to get PQEs done, finally concluding that they were "beating a dead horse:" <http://mgahouse.maryland.gov/mga/play/c0443fe3-95ba-45d7-b8de-513c68e20cfe/?catalog/03e481c7-8a42-4438-a7da-93ff74bdaa4c&autostart=true> (starting at 1:05:00).

Perhaps the most telling detail of all is that MSDE has indicated that, if this bill passes, it will circumvent it by simply inaccurately certifying all applicants as aides on their PQEs. This type of bad faith behavior is not unusual for OCC, which also has a reputation for finding ways to retaliate against child care providers when they raise concerns. It begs for intervention by our elected officials. We cannot allow our government entities to act this way, especially in such a critical & important role they are supposed to have in promoting quality child care in our state.

I thank you so much for your dedication to our State and to our families and for your consideration of my concerns and I hope that you see the significant need to pass this bill.

Sincerely,



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