

TESTIMONY to House of Delegates, HB 396, Early Childhood Screening for Developmental Disabilities

Hello, my name is Christina Lopez and I am President of the Maryland Association for the Education of Young Children (MDAEYC). I am also an instructional resource teacher, in the Early Learning Office of the Prince George's County Public School system. MDAEYC represents approximately 3,000 professionals working in the field of early childhood education. I am writing in support of HB 396, however, I am requesting several amendments.

We are in support of HB 396 because we know first-hand screening young children is an effective, efficient way for professionals to check a child's development, help parents celebrate their child's milestones and know what to look for next, and determine whether follow-up steps are needed. It's also an essential first step toward identifying children with delays or disorders in the critical early years, *before* they start school. Conducting these screenings early, allows us the opportunity to provide children and families with support during the critical years of development; producing greater gains in student achievement and saving tax-payer dollars later down the road to implement remediation services.

Our organization works diligently and continuously to gain support and attention for the importance of the field of early learning education and the critical role we play in our community and society as a whole. Early childhood educators/providers often have children in their care 11 hours a day. This time spent interacting with young children allows for an unparalleled opportunity to gain extensive knowledge of and insights into the development of the children they serve. Often times these educators suspect something isn't quite right with a particular child. Developmental screening allows educators access to a validated and reliable tool, opening the door for important and productive conversations with the child's parents on what is typical for a peer in their age range. These tools are completed in collaboration with the parents, recognizing that parents are their child's first and best teacher, and help guide powerful conversations about their child's strengths and needs. Ultimately, parents have the right to accept or deny the referral for early intervention services allowing the parent to still have the final say over whether their child receives services. In some instances, the tool may show a concerned parent, that the child is right where the child needs to be and that no referral is needed, providing the family with comfort and reassurance. We have found that the most effective screening tools are easy and quick to use, can be easily completed by a parent or provider, as well as easily scored. Whatever the outcome, these types of practices help to continue to professionalize our field and ensure Maryland children are getting the help they need.

The amendments on the Bill we would like to see is to change the term "child care centers" to all licensed child care providers. We also request that funding be put forth to support this effort. Tools range in cost, with one tool costing a provider up to \$300. These tools can be costly for providers to obtain, many of whom struggle to support their own families on a minimal salary. In addition, training on the Developmental Screening Overview, which helps providers understand the process, available tools, and communication with parents costs around \$45 to take. We hope that the State will see the importance of this initiative and see that these costs to intervene early are much more affordable than the costs to intervene in later years. For that reason, we request the State approve the Bill, as well as the funding for this effort.