

TESTIMONY to House Ways and Means Committee, 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 a parent and 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 within the field of early childhood education. I am writing in support of HB 396.

We support HB 396 because we know the critical role early screening can play in young children's healthy development. Developmental screening is an effective, efficient way for professionals to check a child's development, help parents celebrate their child's milestones, and help identify developmental concerns early while guiding parents to needed resources. 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 in a child's life allows us the opportunity to provide children and families with support during the critical years of development, producing more significant 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 early childhood education field 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. Frequently 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 past year has been difficult for us all, but especially for young children. We are yet to see the effect of the pandemic on children's growth and development; that is why now it is more important than ever that we take proactive steps to ensure all children have what they need to be successful. We hope that the State will see the importance of this initiative and see that the cost to intervene early is much more affordable than the cost to intervene later. For that reason, we request the State approve the Bill and the funding for this effort.