

Wee Lad & Lassie Early Learning Center

March 3, 2025

SB 857 Child Care – Prekindergarten Expansion Grant Modifications and Workgroup Testimony “In Favor”

My name is Dr. Lisa Buchy. Since 1985 I have been an owner and director of early education and care programs in AACo. My company currently operates two locations serving over 100 children including children receiving Child Care Scholarship and providing public Pre-K to low-income families for 8 of the past 9 years.

My experience also includes faculty appointments at Johns Hopkins University where I worked on a large-scale childcare quality research grant and at Towson University in the Department of Early Childhood Education where I taught in the educator preparation program at the undergraduate and graduate levels. I serve on the advisory committee of the Maryland State Childcare Leadership Program (MECLP) and the Anne Arundel County Early Childhood Childcare Taskforce.

Early childhood education and care is a key priority for Maryland’s future. High quality care and early education impact school readiness, early literacy and lifelong health and well-being. **Children’s long-term outcomes are significantly impacted by what happens from birth to age 5 and the foundation for all that follows is laid down in the first 5 years of each person’s life.** Young children’s access to high-quality early childhood education and care, including high-quality Prekindergarten programs, is critical to their success in school and in life. The citizens of tomorrow are growing up in Maryland today.

According to the most recent Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) data from 23/24, in Anne Arundel County (AACo), where my programs are located, 5,765 Kindergarten students were enrolled for the 23/24 school year with families reporting only 50% of children engaged in prior early education and care. Thus, over 2,500 children may be in need of high-quality Pre-K experiences. These data also show that just 44% of AACo kindergarten students demonstrated school readiness. The COVID 19 pandemic impacted Maryland’s youngest learners and efforts to mitigate the learning loss continue to be needed. In AACo, children with disabilities are less ready than their peers with just 20% demonstrating school readiness in 23/24. Multilingual learners continue to lag behind their peers with 17% demonstrating school readiness. Household income also impacts children’s readiness for school with children who live in low-income

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households consistently demonstrating decreased levels of school readiness. In AACo 27% of children from low-income households demonstrated school readiness in 23/24. My programs aim to address these needs by providing high quality Pre-K education to eligible children from low-income households, children with disabilities, and children who speak a language other than English at home through the mixed-delivery system and the Prekindergarten Expansion Grant program.

However, participation in the Prekindergarten expansion grant is highly challenging and often impossible. While my programs have a track record of successfully winning and implementing the grant over many years, the current school year (24/25) was a dismal failure. After completing the complex grant application and receiving a grant award, we had to decline the grant last August when we enrolled only 1 eligible child. Had SB 857 already been passed, my program would have had resources including technical assistance and a workgroup to turn to for help instead of losing the grant. HB 857 feels like it was written for me and my programs. Each of the supports that are proposed are conducive to a successful mixed-delivery system and would enable my programs to participate with less struggle. We are ready, willing, and able but we need your help to remove the barriers to participation.

One of the biggest hurdles for community-based ECE providers participating in the Pre-K grant is financial. Early care and education programs are businesses that serve the public good. As such, they are subject to economic factors that influence cost and quality including the cost to provide care, competition, consumer behavior, and the business model of ECE. SB 857 addresses several of the negative financial outcomes for programs that participate in the grant. In the 8 years my programs participated in the Pre-K grant, we received a 15% advance on the funds in late September and regular monthly invoices were paid 60-90 days after submission on the first of each month following the provision of services to children. Thus, the costs of highly paid teachers, assistant teachers, supplies and materials were required to be “fronted” while waiting for grant funds. In my case, I had to borrow the funds to make this work each year. The implementation of advance payments of the full grant amount would mitigate the financially destabilizing effects on ECE programs of grant participation.

The passage SB 857 will achieve the following:

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- Remove negative financial outcomes by stabilizing the Pre-K grant funding with a multi-year grant award, an advance payment model, timely grant application processing and NOGA distribution
- Support grantee success with readily available technical assistance
- Enable greater community-based ECE participation using plain language and languages other than English in the grant application
- Leverage the ECE field expertise by creating a workgroup to incentivize growth and participation

I thank Senator Henson for bringing this much-needed legislation forward and I urge you to support the passage of this bill.