



**February 21, 2025**

**SB 780**

**Prekindergarten - 3-Year-Olds - Private Providers (Parental Choice for Prekindergarten Act)**

**Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee**

**Position: FAVORABLE**

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in support of Senate Bill 780. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government. Additionally, we offer this testimony on behalf of the families of more than 50,000 students served by over 150 PreK-12 Catholic schools in Maryland.

Senate Bill 780 would alter the definition of "Tier I child" to include three-year-old children whose parents elect to enroll them in Pre-K3 with a private provider. The income threshold for eligible families for state-funded Pre-K3 would be 300% of the federal poverty level.

With the state's ambitious prekindergarten expansion goals hampered by cost, private providers could be utilized at a cost savings to the state. Many private providers and nonpublic schools educate students at a vastly lower cost than the state per pupil average. Some Catholic providers have participated in state prekindergarten expansion for several years, providing prekindergarten to four-year-old children whose family income is 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL) or lower. Catholic schools and other providers have the capacity to offer high quality seats at our programs and stand at the ready to partner with the state of Maryland in that endeavor.

All three of (arch)dioceses serving Maryland have a strong commitment to education and recognize the important role that kindergarten-readiness plays in a child's educational development. Within the State of Maryland, there are approximately 120 prekindergarten programs in Catholic schools or parishes, in addition to Headstart programs. Nearly all are accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by MSDE and a vast majority of them employ state-certified prekindergarten teachers.

Lastly, the parental choice option provided by this proposal aligns succinctly with the mission of our Catholic schools, where our faith tradition holds that parents are the first educators of their children. The state owes a duty to ensure all of Maryland's children are afforded the educational opportunities best suited to their needs. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report for Senate Bill 780.