



Voices from the Field: Stakeholder Perspectives on Maryland's Early Childhood Care and Education System¹

Town Hall Meeting Summary

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Introduction

In 2019, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) was awarded a \$10.6 million federal grant through the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) program. A primary goal of this one-year grant is to create a strategic plan that outlines how the state will coordinate existing early childhood care and education (ECE) programs that prepare low-income and disadvantaged children for kindergarten. To inform the strategic plan, the state conducted a statewide ECE needs assessment that included a series of Town Hall meetings. These meetings were used to obtain a first-hand perspective on the needs of Maryland's children and families; issues that impacted access to services and high-quality ECE programs; the transition between the ECE and public school systems; and challenges with the coordination and collaboration across different programs.

This summary provides the top-line takeaways from these Town Hall meetings, which encompassed a wide range of Maryland stakeholders, including parents, early childhood educators, administrators, members of the higher education community, local business and government leaders, and advocates. Town Hall participants provided personal and detailed perspectives on the challenges faced by children and families in the state, as well as their experiences working with state programs and services that support children and prepare them for kindergarten. In addition to the takeaways, the summary concludes with a set of considerations for the state's strategic planning efforts that are based on the stakeholder input. A full Town Hall report, which provides a more detailed account of the meetings and includes a number of quotes that describe the takeaways in the stakeholders' own words, is also available.

Methodology

From March 26 to May 17, 2019, 18 Town Hall meetings were hosted by MSDE, the Maryland Department of Health, and the Maryland Department of Human Services. These meetings were conducted across nine sites in Maryland specifically chosen to ensure broad participation from stakeholders in the state's different geographic regions (see **Figure 1**). For each site, a Town Hall meeting was held in the morning and evening to provide as much access as possible for stakeholders who wished to attend. When possible, the meetings were also livestreamed using Facebook Live to provide stakeholders with an opportunity to participate remotely.

Each Town Hall lasted 2.5 hours and began with presentations from the three host agencies. MSDE also shared regionally specific Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) data to frame the context around this aspect of child outcomes. A facilitation guide was developed to guide the Town Hall conversations, and participants were asked a number of questions about the challenges facing children and families in Maryland, access to services, the quality of ECE settings, transitions from ECE settings to schools, and their ECE information and data needs. Each Town Hall meeting was recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were reviewed, and key themes and perspectives were identified and organized into a report.

¹ The content of the report upon which this summary is based was developed with support from the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Initiative, Grant Number 90TP0032-01-00, for the Maryland State Department of Education.

Figure 1. Maryland Town Hall Meeting Locations



Findings

The Town Hall meetings yielded a wealth of information on a range of topics related to Maryland's ECE system. Overall, stakeholders were positive about the work that the state was doing and appreciated the opportunity to engage in conversations with the agencies. At the same time, participants highlighted a number of systemic issues that they wanted the state to address. The Town Hall conversations painted a clear picture of the challenges faced by vulnerable children and families in Maryland. They also spoke about numerous issues with Maryland's ECE system, including system capacity; issues with the ECE quality improvement system; ECE workforce needs; the lack of coordination across programs; and the need for more seamless transitions from ECE programs and providers into the public school system.

This summary is organized around the following themes that emerged during the Town Hall meetings:

- Challenges faced by Maryland's children and families;
- Challenges faced by Maryland's ECE programs and providers;
- Issues affecting access to programs and services that strengthen, engage, and stabilize families;
- Issues affecting the supply of and access to high-quality ECE providers;
- State initiatives to improve the quality of ECE programs and providers;
- Early childhood/public school connections and transitions; and
- Issues impacting coordination and collaboration of Maryland programs and services to support vulnerable families.

Key points related to each topic include, but are not limited to, what is outlined below. Given that the Town Hall conversations focused on Maryland's ECE system, there is a good deal of overlap in the themes that came to the forefront in the stakeholder conversations. For example, a key challenge for providers is finding qualified early childhood educators, which is also a fundamental issue related to quality. Every effort was made to logically organize the themes in the Town Hall report in a way that accurately reflects the perspectives of the stakeholders. However, it is important to note that the themes could have been organized differently and there may be some overlap in content across the themes.

Stakeholder perspectives on the challenges faced by Maryland's vulnerable children and families

Perhaps the most important role of the Town Hall meetings was to obtain a first-hand account of the challenges faced by Maryland's vulnerable children and families. Participants spoke about a number of pressing challenges affecting Maryland's vulnerable children and families, as well as suggestions for addressing them. Specifically, Town Hall participants discussed:

- Poverty, financial instability, and homelessness and the implications of these issues on child well-being, development, and learning;
- The opioid crisis and child and family needs related to drug and alcohol addiction;
- Transportation as a key need for vulnerable families;
- The prevalence of infant and early childhood mental health issues; and
- The needs and challenges faced by families speaking a language other than English at home.

In terms of addressing these challenges, Town Hall participants discussed the importance of a two-generation approach where children are supported both with direct services and through services that stabilize and strengthen their families.

Stakeholder perspectives on the challenges faced by Maryland’s ECE programs and providers

ECE programs and providers were well represented in the Town Hall meetings. Maryland’s ECE program and provider community discussed a number of pressing needs. These included:

- The need for more teachers that meet state credentials;
- Professional development that is easier for providers to access and that is less costly;
- A better understanding by the state of the impact of MSDE policies on their sustainability as small businesses;
- The need for more bilingual teachers, as well as more support and professional development to serve children who speak languages other than English; and
- A number of needs specific to family child care providers, including their desire to be seen and respected as early childhood professionals, to be more integrated into the state’s mixed delivery system, and to have a closer partnership with MSDE.

Stakeholder perspectives on issues affecting access to services

An important goal of the PDG B-5 grant is to expand access to the “full range of services” that support the development, growth, and school readiness of children in Maryland. Therefore, when determining needs related to accessing services, it is important to understand not only the barriers to accessing high-quality ECE programs, but also barriers to accessing health, nutrition, wellness, and other programs and services that help to “strengthen, engage, and stabilize” families and their children.² Town Hall participants discussed a number of issues that affected their ability and/or willingness to access the services designed to support them, including:

- Lack of awareness about the full range of support services that the state provides;
- Social stigma associated with accessing services and/or the fear of connecting with government programs;
- Bureaucratic, language/literacy barriers, and transportation issues when attempting to access services;
- Low income-eligibility thresholds that make families in need of services ineligible; and
- Lack of system capacity to serve all those in need of services.

According to Town Hall participants, these specific issues significantly affected the ability of vulnerable children and families to receive the programs and services they need and must be addressed by the state.

Stakeholder perspectives on issues that affect the supply and access to ECE providers

In addition to discussing access to health, nutrition, wellness, and other social service programs, Town Hall participants discussed issues affecting the supply of ECE programs and providers in Maryland’s mixed delivery system. The themes that emerged from the Town Hall meetings focused on issues that affect the supply of ECE programs and providers, as well as parents’ ability to access high-quality ECE settings. These themes included the:

- Lack of supply of infant and toddler care across the state;
- Need for more inclusive classrooms for children with disabilities;
- Potential impact of Maryland’s newly enacted minimum wage law on child care businesses; and
- Implications of perceived over-regulation on the supply of ECE.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2018). *Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five*. Retrieved from <https://ami.grantsolutions.gov/HHS-2018-ACF-OCC-TP-1379>

The ability to access a high-quality ECE setting is essential to parents' ability to work and plays a critical role in school readiness of children. It will be important for the state to look at the impact of different laws and regulations on the supply of high-quality care, particularly for infant and toddlers.

Stakeholder perspectives on ECE quality

Improving the quality of ECE settings is an important function of a B-5 early childhood state system. Numerous aspects of ECE provider quality were discussed, including:

- How quality is defined and measured in Maryland;
- The complexity of Maryland's initiatives designed to acknowledge and improve quality, which include Maryland EXCELS, Maryland Accreditation, and the Maryland Child Care Credentialing Program;
- The lack of public awareness about Maryland EXCELS, Maryland Accreditation, and the Maryland Child Care Credentialing Program; and
- Issues with the ECE workforce that included:
 - A lack of respect for the early childhood profession, most clearly manifested in poor compensation and benefits;
 - A shortage of early childhood professionals who have credentials beyond what was required in the Maryland licensing standards;
 - Inadequate pre-service preparation both in terms of capacity to train enough educators and the appropriate coursework to prepare them for the classroom; and
 - A lack of a coordinated in-service professional development system and the need for specific trainings to support teachers in the classroom.

Although some Town Hall participants may have questioned the extent to which parents understood and valued ECE quality, it was an important area of concern for the stakeholders participating in the meetings. Town Hall participants discussed the importance of the early years for future learning and success and the essential role that quality ECE settings play in brain development and promoting school readiness.

Stakeholder perspectives on early childhood/school connections and transition

When children make the transition from early childhood programs to elementary schools, they tend to experience a different setting, teacher, and learning culture. Depending on the relationship between ECE providers and schools, and the processes they have in place, the transition can be seamless or stressful to children and their parents. Town Hall participants discussed the transition from ECE programs into the public school system and the overall connection between schools and early childhood programs. The discussion focused on three themes:

- The overall lack of connection between ECE providers and schools and sources of tension between ECE providers and schools;
- Specific issues regarding the ability to obtain an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a preschool child through the schools; and
- Suggestions for the state to better support ECE/school coordination and transitions.

Town Hall participants noted that MSDE was uniquely positioned to support stronger collaboration and coordination between the schools and early childhood providers and should create initiatives that focus on this effort.

Stakeholder perspectives on collaboration and coordination among existing programs

The ultimate goal of the Maryland's PDG B-5 grant is to find ways to coordinate and align existing early childhood programs, resources, and services. The discussions at the Town Hall meetings described the difficulty providers and families face in navigating the requirements across programs and that some programs seemed to work at cross-purposes. Key themes from the Town Hall discussions that related to collaboration and coordination included:

- MSDE taking a stronger role in coordinating Maryland's prekindergarten (Pre-K) program so that different sectors of the ECE system are not competing for children;
- The need to think about the coordination of program services from the client perspective;
- Providing more case-management services and system "navigators" to support families in accessing services across the fragmented system;

- Expanding the Judy Centers, which is seen by stakeholders as a successful state model for coordinating programs and connecting families to programs and services; and
- Using technology and data effectively to inform and coordinate programs and services.

Considerations for the PDG B-5 Strategic Plan

The discussions at the Town Hall meetings provide important insights into the needs of children, families, and providers in Maryland. These needs, along with the issues raised about coordination, collaboration, and quality of ECE programs, should be taken into consideration as MSDE engages in the strategic planning process. Below are six areas for MSDE to consider as it develops initiatives to include in its strategic plan that would support more equitable access to all ECE provider types, better support coordination and collaboration across different programs and services for children, improve quality, and support parental choice.

Consideration 1: Maryland's strategic plan should address how the state will expand current ECE programs and services to meet the needs of Maryland's children and families.

Town Hall participants spoke at length about the lack of capacity of Maryland's programs to serve all of the state's vulnerable children and families requiring services. Stakeholders noted that numerous programs and services were at capacity, including Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, Judy Centers, the Maryland Pre-K program, Child Care Resource Centers, home visiting services, and programs serving children with disabilities. These capacity issues mean that families go without services or experience long wait times for services. Finding ways to expand the current services to serve additional children and families should be a key goal of the state's strategic planning effort.

Consideration 2: Maryland's strategic plan should address how the value of high-quality ECE and the availability of services are communicated to Maryland families.

Stakeholders raised a number of issues in the Town Hall meetings that focused on how information is communicated to stakeholders. Town Hall participants believed better communication between MSDE and early childhood stakeholders, including parents, could address many of the issues raised related to awareness of program availability, fear and stigma associated with accessing services, service coordination, and parental education regarding child development and the importance of high-quality ECE.

As the Town Hall participants noted, it will be important in the strategic plan that the state consider the many different types of Maryland's families when thinking about communications and outreach strategies. Maryland families are diverse, ranging from grandparents raising grandchildren to single teen mothers. Families in Maryland speak several different languages and have different cultural norms. Accordingly, this diversity must be considered when developing a multi-modal communication system to provide Maryland's vulnerable families with information related to the ECE system. In addition, while the Town Hall meetings were an important first step in better understanding the needs of Maryland children, families, and providers, MSDE should continue to find ways to understand the experiences of the children and families as they navigate the ECE system.

Consideration 3: Maryland's strategic plan should continue to build on state quality improvement initiatives, particularly addressing the capacity of the state's early childhood workforce.

It is clear from Town Hall meetings that Maryland has one of the most advanced quality improvement systems in the country. Maryland EXCELS, credentialing, accreditation and the associated training and professional development make for a robust quality improvement system. Stakeholders noted that one drawback of the extensive quality improvement initiatives is the complexity of the different components of the quality improvement system. Accordingly, efforts to build on the quality improvement system in the strategic plan should work to streamline and integrate the different system components in order for the state's ECE stakeholders to better understand the distinctions between them.

Perhaps more importantly, the state should include initiatives in the strategic plan that support the development of the early childhood workforce. This includes addressing all aspects of the system that are designed to support workforce development including respect for the profession, pre-service and in-service training, compensation and benefits, and workplace environments. Again, stakeholders emphasized that these initiatives must be created with all sectors of the current workforce in mind and an understanding of the impact of rules and regulations on the current workforce.

Consideration 4: Maryland’s strategic plan should address how the expansion of the state’s Pre-K program will be better coordinated with the other ECE programs and services that children and families need to thrive.

Town Hall participants discussed ongoing coordination issues between Pre-K programs and other child care programs. The Maryland Pre-K program serves four-year-old children that would otherwise be served by the state’s market-based child care providers. Four-year-olds are the most cost effective for child care providers to serve because of the higher adult to child ratio and bigger group size. Stakeholders discussed that taking four-year-olds out of the market-based system has a financial impact on providers, which is passed on to parents with younger children and also impacts the capacity and price of care for children younger than three. The Kirwan Commission for Innovation and Excellence in Education is proposing a significant expansion in the state Pre-K program to serve three- and four-year-olds at no cost for families up to 300 percent of the federal poverty threshold and four-year-olds on a sliding scale up to 600 percent of the federal poverty level. Maryland’s strategic plan must address how this expansion will be implemented to support all aspects of Maryland’s provider community and how the state will address the supply and quality of infant and toddler care while expanding the Pre-K program.

In addition, with the expansion of Pre-K in Maryland, it will be important to include initiatives within the strategic plan that help connect children in these new Pre-K slots to the services that they may need. Town Hall participants discussed the ways in which Head Start programs used family service workers to connect children and families to other services they may need with a similar role played by the Judy Centers in a relatively small number of Title I schools across the state. A significant expansion of the Pre-K program will require a corresponding expansion in mechanisms by which children and families are connected to services.

Consideration 5: Maryland’s strategic plan should include initiatives to support seamless transitions between ECE providers and schools.

Town Hall participants discussed the lack of connection and sometimes adversarial relationship between the schools and the ECE providers. Often, ECE providers do not feel that they are respected by the school systems and school systems are often concerned about the school readiness of children attending ECE programs in their communities. MSDE is uniquely positioned to support stronger collaboration and coordination between the schools and early childhood providers. As such, the strategic plan should include initiatives that bridge the gap between ECE providers and schools and work to develop one continuum of high-quality early childhood care and education starting at birth through kindergarten entry.

Consideration 6: Maryland’s strategic plan should address the state’s data system and ways in which the state can track children to reduce duplication of services and the burden on families.

Town Hall participants highlighted the need for a robust data system to support access to services, better coordination between programs, and a better understanding of the impact of different ECE programs on child well-being and school readiness. Accordingly, Maryland’s strategic plan should include initiatives that continue to build out the state’s data system, including the development of a unique identifier for children to track their progress through the ECE system, the services that are accessed, and the impact of those services.

Through the development and implementation of a PDG B-5 strategic plan that addresses these considerations, MSDE will move closer to its ultimate vision of “one community working together” to support children in building a strong foundation for success in school and in life.