Maryland Ready:

Maryland's Path
to School Readiness
and Success

Prenatal to Age 8

Strategic Plan 2020-2025

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Executive Summary

From the Atlantic Coastline, across the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, to the mountains of Western Maryland, Maryland is home to over 660,000 young children from birth to age 8 and their families.[1] Maryland's families and children come from a wide range of racial, cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds—yet the universal needs of young children remain the same regardless of setting, family composition, or racial, cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Using the opportunity provided by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) award, Maryland has taken stock of our early childhood care and education (ECE) system and created *Maryland Ready: A Path to School Readiness and Success*, a strategic plan that puts forward our vision, goals, and strategies to improve the state system over the next 5 years. Implementation of this plan will create a systemic foundation that puts a focus on equity, and prioritizes evidence-based models and program effectiveness. It will also allow the state to expand and improve our early childhood workforce, and infuse the system with continuous quality improvement strategies.

Despite careful planning and elements of an ECE system solidly in place, state and local environments can change quickly in the face of catastrophic emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, or dramatic economic downturns. Maryland's strategic plan is intended to be evergreen, adaptable to families' changing needs and priorities in the moment while staying course to its long-term vision. *Maryland Ready: A Path to School Readiness and Success* is a commitment to ensure that young children and families thrive and that flexible decision-making about strategies to meet changing needs and contexts can evolve. Maintaining this focus and dynamic approach gives Maryland the tools necessary to put all of our young children on a path to healthy development, school readiness and long-term success.

The Science of Brain Development

The science is clear. Children's brains develop at their fastest pace during the early years, when synapses form at a rate of 1 million new neural connections per second.[2] This intense period of learning and development means that the youngest brains are highly flexible and responsive to the environment as their fundamental architecture is established. This sensitivity to experiences, environments, and interactions levels off as we age and as the brain starts to prioritize efficiency over expanding connections. Continuing advances in neuroscientific research reinforces what we now know—the early years are the most effective time to influence brain development and put children on a path to healthy development, life-long well-being, and achievement.[3]

Based on clear evidence that early supports and intervention lead to the most favorable outcomes for young children—especially children experiencing adversity—Maryland plans to further expand and enhance its service and program infrastructure for children from the prenatal period through age 8. By strengthening evidence-based programs for this population, providing resources for new services, and expanding the reach in high-need communities, Maryland aims to improve early care and learning experiences for families and their young children.

The Economic Sense in Investing in Early Childhood

Maryland's leaders agree that investing in ECE makes financial sense. The economic benefits of investing in young children through high-quality ECE programs for all children have been shown to lead to a return on investment to society of approximately $7 for every $1 spent; for children experiencing adversity, the return has been shown to be as high as $12 for every $1 spent.[4] Significant investments in the health and educational development of Maryland's youngest learners

positively impacts the future workforce and productivity. Business leaders in Maryland also understand the importance of a robust child care system to a thriving economy. Employee absence and turnover due to child care issues for working parents cost Maryland employers $2.41 billion in 2016, and lowered the state's economic output by $1.28 billion in one year.[5] Maryland has backed its belief in ECE with the funding to finance expansions, for example, by increasing spending on prekindergarten by $94 million dollars from SFY 2019 to SFY 2021, doubling the income eligibility for child care scholarships to 65% of the state median income in SFY 2018, and passing a law to increase child care provider reimbursement rates to the 60th percentile of the cost of child care rates reported in the latest market rate survey by SFY 2021.

Celebrating Diversity and Promoting Equity

Maryland is one of the most racially diverse states in the nation, ranking 6th out of 50 in 2018 in terms of diversity. Less than half (40%) of children under age 5 are White, 30% are Black, 18% are Hispanic, 6% are Asian, and the remainder identify as Native American, mixed race or other.[6] Maryland's families also vary widely in their ethnicity, home language, socioeconomic background, geographic area, religious affiliation and family composition.[7] This diversity enriches our state and creates additional opportunities for learning and growing, highlighting the importance of applying an equity lens to all dimensions of our work with children and families.

Maryland is committed to deploying a strengths-based approach with a focus on equity as we strive to ensure access and affordability to high-quality programs for all families and children regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location, deepen cultural and linguistic responsiveness within programs, and support an effective and well-compensated early childhood workforce that is representative of the children and families throughout the state.

Foundations for Success: Policies, Parent Choice and Programs in Maryland's Mixed-Delivery System

As a geographically and demographically diverse state, Maryland has developed a robust mixed-delivery system of early childhood programs and services to support families and their young children, empower parental choice and family engagement, and ensure successful transitions throughout the early years and into the early grades. In Maryland, the term mixed-delivery incorporates an array of services and programs that are offered by various agencies that complement and are coordinated with each other to serve children and families holistically. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), Maryland Department of Health (MDH) and Maryland Department of Human Services (MDHS) partner to ensure comprehensive, connected, and high-quality services are available across all the geographic areas of the state.

Support for Early Childhood Professionals and Program Quality

Recognizing that an important aspect of parent choice is having access to high-quality programs and service—and facing a shortage of qualified providers and teachers—Maryland is committed to investing in the ECE professional workforce. A key strategy to improve the quality of ECE teachers and administrators is the Child Care Credentialing Pathway, a voluntary credentialing system with financial rewards intended to support continued professional development related to child development, curriculum, health, safety and nutrition, professionalism, as well as community and special needs. In addition, the state has many accredited colleges and universities, including 15 institutions that offer an Associate's (2-year) degree and 12 that offer a Bachelor's degree. Setting

the bar on professional qualifications, public prekindergarten programs require teachers to have a 4-year degree and Maryland certification in early childhood education; and Head Start and Early Head Start teachers are required to have a CDA credential or an Associate's or Bachelor's degree with a focus on early childhood.[8] To support the ECE workforce, Maryland continues to increase funding for the Child Care Career and Professional Development (CCCPDF) program, providing financial support for educators to obtain an Associate's or Bachelor's degree. Expanding access to professional development opportunities, increasing the alignment between institutes of higher education, enhancing opportunities for professionals to grow using a well-developed career lattice, and improving compensation are important to continuing to strengthen Maryland's ECE system.

To ensure that ECE programs are offering the quality of care and developmental and educational activities that families look for in a program, Maryland recognizes various accrediting agencies, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC), and encourages all programs to participate in the statewide Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) called Maryland EXCELS. Maryland EXCELS is a voluntary, portfolio-style system that awards ratings from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) based on a program's implementation of nationally recognized standards and best practices. The system provides programs with a roadmap that encourages and rewards improvement of services, promotes Maryland's definition of quality, and offers a framework and supports designed to increase the quality of programs. In addition, Maryland's Child Care Resource Centers (CCRCs) provide guidance, leadership and services designed to improve the quality, availability, and affordability of ECE in every community across the state.

Maryland's enduring commitment to parent choice and mixed-delivery options broaden the opportunities and experiences for children across the state, and ultimately improve school readiness outcomes.

Getting Off to a Good Start: The Need to Improve Kindergarten Readiness for Vulnerable Children

When children experience adversity in their early years, they can fail to thrive. Maryland's vulnerable children are even less likely to show kindergarten readiness. Although 47% of all Maryland children began the 2019-20 school year demonstrating readiness, some groups showed significantly fewer children exhibiting readiness skills than others. For example, only 19% of children with disabilities were ready, compared to 50% of non-disabled peers. Only 18% of Multi-Language Learners were ready, compared to 52% of English fluent peers. Just over one-third (34%) of children from low-income households showed readiness, whereas 50% of other children showed readiness. And, while 60% of white children were ready, only 42% of African American children and 26% of Hispanic children were ready.[9]

A vital element of Maryland's focus on equity seeks to ensure resources are available among those families and communities where they are most needed. Based on feedback from the Needs Assessment, the vulnerable populations for which Maryland will prioritize resources and services include:

- Children from birth-age 3
- Children and families living in or near poverty
- Children from a racially or ethnically diverse family
- Children experiencing homelessness and migrant families
- Children in rural areas
- Children and families with special needs
- Children in foster care or involved in the child welfare system
- Children with incarcerated parents
- Multi-Language Learners, also called multilingual learners
- Children exposed to substance abuse and addiction
- Children of families in the military
- Children exposed to toxic stress, trauma or multiple adverse early childhood experiences

Maryland will ensure that sufficient resources and attention go toward providing these children and families with the services and opportunities they need to thrive.

Maryland's Vision for Young Children and Families

Maryland has a simple vision, a comprehensive mission, and a set of principles that provide 10 pillars for the ECE system. An essential component of the mission is serving children experiencing adversity and otherwise vulnerable children.

Maryland's Vision and Mission

Maryland's vision is that all young children and their families will thrive.

In collaboration with a multitude of stakeholders, the state has developed the following comprehensive mission statement for its ECE system:

Maryland promotes a well-coordinated and integrated system of programs, supports and services where each child has equitable access to high-quality early childhood experiences to develop a healthy body, healthy mind, and the foundational knowledge and skills needed to succeed, and where every family has access to the resources needed to be effective as their child's first and most important teacher and advocate.

This vision and mission responds to what we know about brain development and early learning, creating systems that value all children, and the power of strategic investments. The vision and mission are designed to protect families' right to have options in the environments and services experienced by their young children. With its commitment to equity, *all children* in Maryland means regardless of income, race, home language, zip code, culture or background, and ability level.

Guiding Principles: Maryland's Pillars for ECE System Building

Foundational to Maryland's goals and action plans is a set of principles that state, school, and program leaders hold to be true and universal. Maryland believes that children and families across Maryland thrive when we work across sectors according to these ten principles:

1. Expand on the successes that Maryland has already created with its mixed-delivery system and strong state and local infrastructure that empowers both systemic and community driven strategies.

2. Adopt a child- and family-centered approach to program and service delivery that emphasizes prevention and the importance of starting early, including during the prenatal period.

3. Ensure access to affordable ECE services for all young children throughout the state.

4. Provide high-quality care and education programming for all young children and their families that supports all developmental domains, including foundational skills for demonstrating school readiness and physical, social-emotional, mental, and behavioral health.

5. Prioritize the needs of families experiencing adversity or disadvantage, or who are otherwise vulnerable.

6. Engage communities and families through equitable, culturally and linguistically responsive, and 2-generational approaches grounded in evidence-based models.

7. Invest in systems building coordination and collaboration, leveraging federal, state, and local funding, as well as public-private partnerships.

8. Provide regular and ongoing public forums and feedback loops, transparent communication channels, and consistent messaging.

9. Maximize data systems capacity and use, including application to policy and program decision-making.

10. Continually evaluate state progress based on metrics and measures of success that reflect stakeholder input and systemic collaboration, and revise as needed.

These principles guide the development of our regulations, systems, investments and actions to benefit all of Maryland's families and communities.

Realizing the Vision: Maryland's Goals, Action Steps and Measures of Progress

Maryland is well positioned to enhance and expand its mixed-delivery system for young children and families over the next 5 years by relying on the science of brain development and program effectiveness, empowering parent choice, and celebrating the rich diversity of Maryland's families.

Maryland Ready: A Path to School Readiness and Success explains how information was gathered from a range of stakeholders and sources to inform Maryland's goals for the next 5 years of serving children in their early years across intersecting areas of the mixed-delivery system.

Six Goals that Will Move Maryland Forward

Maryland's six goals and key strategies are as follows.

1. **Strengthen availability and access** by increasing availability and choice for all families and especially vulnerable families, decreasing barriers, serving more children with special needs in inclusive settings, and improving coordination between ECE and health services.

2. **Improve and support program quality** by increasing quality across sectors, focusing on equity, increasing kindergarten readiness for all children, and improving capacity to meet infants' and children's mental health needs.

3. **Deepen family engagement** by increasing families' awareness of high-quality programs, expanding 2-generational programming, and enhancing families' opportunities to engage.

4. **Ensure successful transition experiences** by strengthening institutional support for transitions, supporting families through transitions, and improving transition-focused professional development opportunities.

5. **Expand and enhance workforce development** by improving professional development opportunities, strengthening equity, coordination and alignment efforts, and improving compensation for ECE professionals.

6. **Improve systems for infrastructure, data and resource management** by improving coordination across agencies, modernizing the data system, using resources in ways that promote equity, and streamlining funding mechanisms.

Our Charge and Call to Action

A broad group of Marylanders came together several times over many months to think deeply about and discuss needs and priority actions to improve the lives of young children and their families. Maryland's Path to School Readiness and Success reflects the collective wisdom of parents, educators, child care providers, health providers, state agencies staff, and community partners. More than ever in the context of a pandemic that is causing suffering to Maryland's families—vulnerable families in particular—the state is eager to get to work to implement the strategies and actions outlined in the plan.

One of the most pressing needs is to continue to modernize and streamline the use of data throughout the implementation process to ensure that decision makers are able to understand how rapidly changing contexts impact families and early childhood professionals, and respond adaptively. It is also critical to consider how to continue to make services accessible and high quality for families of young children including by increasing access to two-generational programs. As Maryland's leaders make difficult funding decisions, this plan emphasizes that prioritizing equity and support for vulnerable children and families will be essential for keeping Maryland on the path to school readiness and success for all children.

In order to achieve the 6 goals outlined in this plan, it is important that all voices and stakeholders remain engaged in helping to move the plan to action. The strong governance structures that Maryland already has in place will keep implementation moving forward regardless of circumstances, and alignment between the statewide and local Early Childhood Advisory Councils will ensure ongoing communication about changes for cohesive implementation of priority strategies. Maryland's mixed-delivery system will grow stronger and be more easily accessible to all of Maryland's diverse families, and more connected across services and programs. With a singular vision and multiple entry points for achieving its goals, Maryland can make things better not just for some of Maryland's children and families, but for all of them.

A renewed commitment to Maryland's vision is now needed from various stakeholders, including policymakers, service providers, educators, health care workers, business leaders, foundations, families and others. Moreover, a commitment to act from people and groups throughout the state, in support of these goals, is a contribution to the renewal and well-being of Maryland's children, families, and communities. All of Maryland's children deserve the best that we can provide so they can thrive, no matter the circumstances.

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[7] The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2019). *Kids Count Data Center*. Retrieved online at: https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/8446-child-population-by-race-and-age-group#ranking/2/any/true/37/68l62/17078

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