**March 26, 2024**

**Testimony Supporting HB 1441: Early Childhood Education – Publicly Funded Prekindergarten Programs - Alterations**

**Submitted to the Senate Committee on Education, Energy and Environment**

**Your first and last name**

**The name of your child care program or organization**

**Address of your child care program or organization**

**Phone number to reach you**

**Email address to reach you**

We have been following the work on HB 1441 this legislative session, as each provision directly impacts our programs, our families, and our whole neighborhoods.

Children experience healthy child development that is crucial for success in school and in life, in family child care, centers, and school-based early childhood programs. Knowing this, the Kirwan Commission and the “Blueprint” legislation stood strong on a mixed delivery approach to delivering preK. That means having preK available in schools AND in child care centers and family child care.

Implementation has been challenging for school districts for a variety of reasons. Community-based early childhood educators know what it takes to participate as a true partner. We continue to see first-hand that it is right to evolve the thinking in the original Blueprint work.

To ensure mixed delivery, we must value the strengths and competencies of the existing workforce. We must strengthen the laws and the real options so that parents can choose what is best for their family, and the whole community benefits from partnering with early childhood educators in child care programs.

We appreciate the Blueprint leaders, the Maryland State Department of Education, and bill sponsors for understanding and supporting this priority and hearing the voices of those affected by these policies.

**Qualifications, paths for the profession, and funding**

* The new career ladder is an important building block and opportunity for the profession.
* Please clarify how the ladder itself compensates educators, as the text is written, and how increased compensation is accomplished as an individual moves to different levels.
* Maryland’s state leaders must embrace, build, and implement multiple paths to qualifying for the role of lead teacher and assistant teacher. We appreciate the updated timelines, scenarios and options presented in HB 1441.

**Child Care Career and Professional Development Fund**

We are thrilled to see the provisions of HB 600/SB 500 Education - Child Care Career and Professional Development Fund – Alterations included in HB 1441.Passage of this legislation will open much-needed opportunities for early childhood educators and the families counting on us.This bill calls for:

* updating the qualifications for an award from the Child Care Career and Professional Development Fund to include a service obligation to work in an approved child care setting for at least 20 hours per week.
* requiring the Office of Child Care at MSDE to prioritize grant awards to applicants who have not completed any college courses for credit.
* allowing an applicant to have attended or be accepted to an accredited college or university outside of Maryland and here is why that is especially important: there are schools from coast to coast *but not in Maryland* that offer native language or bilingual coursework in early childhood education or a related field. Ensuring Maryland’s educators can access education in their most confident language is a big step forward for equity, language justice, ensuring meaningful experiences for early childhood educators and families.

(Optional: insert a little bit about your experience. For instance, are any of the points above the MOST personally important to you? If you are in a role that hires early childhood educators, how would the ideas of this legislation help? If this had been in place earlier in your career, how would it have helped? How will this help someone you know if it became law?)

**Ensuring access for all eligible private providers**

We continue to be concerned that although family child care is named as a desired partner in mixed delivery preK, some Maryland leaders continue to put forward ideas that are really structured for the operations of a center and a center’s staff. In the Joining Voices community, child care center leaders and family child care leaders stand together as early childhood education should truly be.

Not every licensed center and registered family child care home will want to partner with the school district; not every eligible private provider will be selected. But all eligible providers should have the option and opportunity, and not be blocked by intentional or unintended barriers.

Getting this right – in word and in deed - is both an issue of ensuring equity for educators who have dedicated years to this field, as well as an opportunity to invest in learning that is happening where children currently are.

Optional: insert a little bit about your experience.

**Waivers on meeting mixed delivery expectations**

Waivers in current policy and practice delay what needs to be done, without urgently ensuring the changes take place.

* The additional requirements of a memorandum of understanding can help, along with the support of the “model” that MSDE is directed to create in HB 1441.
* We are concerned about how long a school board can put off mixed-delivery decision-making (2028-29 for Tier 1 four-year olds and 2031-2032 for Tier 1 three-year-olds).
* We urge thoughtful monitoring of the memorandum of understanding and the waivers. The “good faith effort” demonstration asked of school boards is subjective and needs structure.

The new benchmarks of 10% of preK slots in community-based providers should make the mixed delivery waivers obsolete in my county. Still, the school boards still need to be pressed to engage meaningfully at the same time as this work to improve statewide policy.

We are here, we are ready, but we cannot participate under the current expectations because of funding confusion, the hiring crisis, and the need to stand strong as a full-day, full-year early childhood experience for children while their parents go to work or school. We simply cannot take the preK risk without more clarity in policy and practice. The ideas in HB 1441 can help.

Optional: insert a little bit about your experience.

**Hubs**

Many of us in our Joining Voices community have been talking about the value of “hubs” since the Blueprint was still at the Kirwan Commission table. This can be one of the keys to success. Hubs should be community-based organizations with relationships with the child care center and family child care program leaders, demonstrated competency in strengths-based approaches, and ready to co-design services with the field. The organization must be grounded in the values of equitable distribution of funds, tailored support appropriate to the settings, and meaningful opportunities.

* We strongly recommend that the bill is amended to name contracting with local Resource Centers or Judy Centers to be the local hubs.
* HB 1441 is silent on funding for this hub work, or what types of entities and staff would be competent to do this important work.
* The bill should call for an equitable process to identify effective hub entities, as well as communicating the expectation that the hubs staff have expertise to support family child care as well as centers.
* We ask that you also consider calling for expanded capacity of state agency staff to process contracts and payments that are timely, accurate and transparent.
* We do not understand the “program” that the Department is to create to support eligible private providers with meeting the preK requirements and is expected to work with the hubs. Please clarify the intention of this effort.

**Developing pathways and being transparent**

* The Maryland Educator Shortage Reduction Act of 2023 requires MSDE, in cooperation with institutions of higher education and other stakeholders, to establish a viable alternative pathway to certification. HB 1441 is an important package of next steps to build on that work.
* Importantly, the Maryland Educator Shortage Reduction Act of 2023 allows for practicum to be done in an educator’s own program – whether that is their own family child care or a center classroom where they already work. This can happen *if* the college chooses this, *and* it is approved by the MSDE Superintendent.
* Despite this huge step forward, community-based child care providers in centers and in family child care continue to express concern about the practicum format in which educators must leave their current job to student-teach in another setting. We can work together to ensure a more transparent and accessible approval process; clear communications with the early childhood educator community; and incentives for colleges to create the options that will support educators and families.