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**TESTIMONY to the Kirwan Commission on Universal PreK Expansion,  
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Good afternoon members of the Kirwan Commission. My name is Tracy Merriman Jost. Since 2006, I have owned and operated Kid's Campus Early Learning Center, a Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) accredited early learning center that serves 150 students aged 6 weeks to 12 years old and that participates in Maryland EXCELS Quality Rating & Improvement System. Recently, I was a member of Maryland's Workgroup to Study the Implementation of Universal Access to Prekindergarten for 4-Year-Olds that submitted a report to this Commission. From 2014-2017, I worked at Maryland State Department of Education and managed the State and Federal PreK Expansion Grant. I have recently been hired by the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes in the role of Senior Policy Advisor through Rutgers University that currently provides technical assistance to the Department of Education on early learning initiatives including PreK expansion.

Several years ago, the thought of universal PreK worried me. It worried me for a few reasons. I built my early learning center with quality being at the forefront of my mind. I have an advanced graduate degree in education public policy and extensive continuing education in early childhood. I sought accreditation for my Center through Maryland State Department of Education. Accreditation is not an easy process. It usually takes approximately two years to accomplish and includes high-quality standards. To name just a few of the standards: implementation of a MSDE recommended curriculum, developmentally appropriate practices, on-going assessments of children, and continuous program improvement. In addition, my school participates in Maryland EXCELS, the State's Quality Rating & Improvement System. That system includes the accreditation process and builds on it with added components of quality administrative practices and continued education of staff and administration. As an education policy professional, it concerned me that most Public Prekindergarten programs were not accredited and not participating in the QRIS system and that I could possibly lose the 40 pre-kindergarten students to those schools. I worried whether those students were best served there. As a private business owner, that notion would also result in a significant loss in revenue.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work for MSDE for three years and managed the PreK Expansion grant. During that time, I needed to change my perspective. We already had in place the \$4.3 million State PreK Expansion grant to serve low-income four-year olds in mixed delivery settings. We subsequently won the Federal PreK Expansion grant of \$15 million/year over a four-year period. That grant was won on the model of a mixed delivery system which would provide funds for both public and private programs to support low income four-year old students. We worked to establish collaborative partnerships among the private providers and public-school systems. We looked for ways for the two systems to support one another including shared professional development, support for students with special needs and who are English language learners, and shared enrollment recruiting strategies. We knew that it was important to not only put children in seats but to put them in settings that provided quality early childhood education. So, we required the private centers to employ a certified teacher and pay them commensurate to the starting salary of a teacher in their school district (approximately \$45,000/school year). We required the public PreK programs to achieve accreditation and

participate in Maryland EXCELS. The standards and measures of quality among the two systems are equivalent. Monitoring and technical assistance by the State staff occurred to help the two systems achieve quality and work together.

As I visited publicly funded PreK classrooms in both public and private schools around the State, I was over-joyed to see that both settings raised the bar of quality instruction to PreK Students. I was also happy to observe that systems were beginning to change. The systems are becoming more collaborative. School systems began inviting private providers to their professional development trainings and helped integrate enrollment recruitment strategies. Private programs were sharing how they accomplished accreditation and how to navigate the QRIS system. This process of collaboration is on-going today and is still receiving technical assistance from State staff as some districts have been more successful than others.

The opportunity of managing the PreK grant changed my perspective. The thought of universal access to PreK no longer worries me. In fact, it is what I think is needed for the children of our State. I was glad to hear that this commission is reaching consensus on some of those building blocks which include universal access for low income PreK students, mixed delivery system of public and private settings, and quality standards. I know you all are struggling with the price tag but I want to remind you that quality costs. Allow me to share with you some of the discussion of the PreK Workgroup. I shared that the parents of a four-year old at my center located in Calvert County pay approximately \$10,000/student. Others reported that in Prince George's County it is approximately \$15,000/student, and in Montgomery County upwards to \$20,000/student. The APA report you have estimates quality PreK instruction for a student at approximately \$12,000/student. Currently, PreK Expansion grants in Maryland are paying \$7,344 per student per school year. For private programs to participate in Universal PreK, employ a certified teacher and pay the commensurate starting salary, it must be economically feasible for them to do so. However, as you work through your funding calculations, I hope you consider the following—the cost savings for school construction/capital improvement, bus transportation, administrative and management personnel and other factors that can be off-set by leveraging the private settings, and providing flexibility to scale as enrollments go up and down.

Today, I am an enthusiastic advocate for universal access to PreK because it is about the students. I believe these three principles are key to achieving that:

1. Universal access to PreK delivered through mixed settings including public and private schools. Require those settings to work collaboratively to maximize enrollment recruitment and opportunities for quality.
2. Quality standards are uniformly applied across settings because the students and their families have a right to expect the same quality in whatever setting they choose.
3. Investments must be sufficient to ensure both universal access and quality.