



Testimony Concerning Pre-Kindergarten and Early Childhood Education  
Presented to the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education  
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Good afternoon, Commissioner Kirwan and other members of the Commission.

My name is Crystal Hardy-Flowers, and I'm the Director of Little Flowers Early Childhood and Development Center in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of Baltimore City. If that neighborhood sounds familiar, that's probably because it's where violence erupted in April of 2015, after the death of Freddie Gray. That violence and all that ensued in the area immediately outside Little Flowers' doors put tremendous stress on our students and their families. Helping them cope and process their experiences put everything my staff and I know about child development and family engagement to the test.

I tell you this story to make a point: It's often said that it takes a village to raise a child, and that schools can't undertake all the challenges of educating our children alone. As Maryland moves to expand access to pre-kindergarten, I urge us all to recognize that parents, schools, and other public institutions have a valuable partner to work with. I'm referring to the child care programs that are already operating in our communities.

Public schools not only can but should embrace partnerships with child care to provide high-quality care and education for all Maryland 4-year-olds. I'm proud to say that Little Flowers is working this year under an agreement with Baltimore City Public Schools and our Judy Center to provide publicly funded pre-K for 13 students in our child care center. I realize that participating in a pre-K public-private partnership with our schools requires my child care center and many of my fellow providers to meet quality and accountability standards. I say "bring it on." I'm ready, willing, and able to help, not just for the good of my program but most importantly for the benefit of all the children in my care.

What do school systems gain through pre-K partnerships with programs like mine? I guess the most obvious thing is that we can help schools serve more children without incurring the tremendous costs of building more classrooms and covering transportation. But maybe even more important is that because the partner programs have to meet high quality standards to provide pre-K, they improve the whole pipeline of future students. Not just the four-year-olds but all the younger children in my program benefit when we raise our quality.

What do parents gain from pre-K partnerships? Again, I guess the most obvious thing is that my program and many others like mine are open from early morning till evening—much longer than a typical 6.5-hour school day lasts. So we can provide on-site before- and after-school care that

lines up much better with parents' workday schedules. We can also serve younger siblings from the same family in one location. Family engagement is one of our great strengths. But there's also an educational benefit to pre-K students having continuity of care in a familiar setting, and in a program that focuses on kids from birth to age five, not primarily on Kindergarten to 6<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Overall, I think that schools, parents, and the whole community benefit from partnering with providers who can embody and promote a better understanding of the developmental needs of our youngest learners and apply that understanding in pre-K classrooms wherever they may be. I assure you all that I'll continue to do what it takes to be the best partner I can be with parents and schools as we try to achieve our shared and most important goal—making Baltimore City and everywhere in Maryland a great place to be a young learner.