

## **Building Block #1: Provide Strong Supports for Children and Their Families Before Students Arrive at School**

### **GAP ANALYSIS**

#### *Support for families with young children in the top-performing countries*

Most of the top-performing countries provide government support for families with young children that, in breadth and depth, far exceeds the support provided by any state in the United States. This often includes a family allowance, paid family leave for the mother or father—often for a year or more— free medical care, health screening services, home visits by nurses, prenatal services, maternal care services, wellness care, and parent education.

Singapore, for example, provides a one-time “baby bonus” of US \$5,737 for each of the first two children and US \$7,172 for each additional child. They also open a Child Development Account that can be used to fund child care and many other educational services and put US \$2,141 in the account at birth and up to US \$2,141 in the account in matching contributions each year thereafter. Finland provides a monthly allowance of US \$103 for each child through the age of 17, with monthly supplements for single parents of an additional US \$53 per child. These subsidies are in addition to all the other services just described.

These service packages are typically designed to enable one or both parents to stay at home and bond with their newborns for their first few months to two years or more, with no sacrifice in income. After that, these countries provide highly subsidized, high-quality child care on a schedule that enables the parents to work a full day without worrying about the welfare of their children. Increasingly, the responsibility for the availability and quality of child care services is lodged in the Ministries of Education, so that the provision of these services can be coordinated with the early childhood education system and the system for formal schooling, and so that there is a smooth progression in the design and operation of these services as the child develops.

All of the countries benchmarked as top performers offer free or very low cost, high quality early childhood education for all 3 to 5 year olds (compulsory schooling typically begins at age 6). In some of these countries the universal programs serving pre-compulsory school age children are called prekindergarten and in others preschool. In many of these countries, early childhood education is provided by both government and private providers, and the private providers are generally held accountable for their use of public funds. These countries are raising their standards for the quality of preschool faculty. Finland, for example, makes sure that at least one-third of the child care workers as well as the lead teacher in every preschool program have a bachelor’s degree. All of the teachers in their pre-primary school are required to have master’s degrees and a teacher certification if they are based in a school setting.

In Ontario, all teachers of 4 and 5-year-olds must have full certification as regular teachers. Full-day kindergarten is free for all 4 and 5-year-olds in Ontario. Almost all 5-year-olds are enrolled. Fifty percent of the 4-year-olds are enrolled and that proportion is growing quickly.

*The gap between Maryland and the top performers*

No American state provides the quality or range of services just described. None offers family allowances or the kind of paid family leave just described or free medical care or the range of services to new mothers that characterize the standard offering in many of the top performing countries. That includes Maryland.

In the United States, Maryland is one of only a few states that has begun to offer a full suite of wrap-around social services to families with young children before they enter school, although it is inadequate to meet the actual demand for such services. One important source of such services is Maryland's Family Support Centers. They are open to all families with children under 4 years old, regardless of income level. They offer parenting education, workforce programs, home visitation programs, infant and toddler education programs, and connect families with other services like Head Start. There are, however, only 25 such centers around the State, serving less than 3 percent of the cohort.

Maryland is also home to the Judith P. Hoyer Early Childhood Care and Family Education Centers, known as "Judy Centers," which coordinate services for children from the time they are born until they enter kindergarten. Located at a limited number of Title I schools, they pull together from community resources a combination of early childhood education, family activities, health care, adult education, identification of special needs and early intervention, child care, parenting classes and family literacy. These centers in Maryland have been admired and copied in a growing number of other states.

The average salary for child care workers in Maryland is half of the average statewide wage for all workers, whereas, in the benchmark countries, it is typically 60 to 70 percent of the average jurisdiction wage. The minimum qualifications for serving in the child care industry are higher in the benchmark countries than in Maryland and they are rising rapidly.

Maryland's child care subsidies for low-income families are notably lower than those provided in the comparison states and the benchmark countries and, in fact, among the very lowest in the country. Maryland's income eligibility to receive a subsidy for child care is \$31,000 or less—an eligibility level that is among the country's very lowest—while it is about \$60,000 in the benchmark states (New Jersey, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts). Although Ontario's subsidy is comparable to Maryland, Singapore has universal subsidies for all families with additional supplements for families with incomes under US \$64,000 and Finland subsidizes at income under US \$71,000.

Maryland is widely regarded as a leader in early childhood education in the United States. . It is one of only 8 states plus D.C. with compulsory kindergarten starting at the age of 5 (only 15

states require kindergarten attendance at all) and one of only 13 states (plus D.C.) that require districts to offer full-day kindergarten. The State also requires districts to offer half-day pre-K for 4-year olds from low-income families. This is more extensive than any of the benchmarked states except New Jersey. Nonetheless, Maryland does not measure up to the 10 or more states that have universal pre-K for 4-year-olds available to families. Maryland and Massachusetts have aggressively leveraged their early childhood quality rating and improvement system (known as EXCELS in Maryland) to drive improvement in early education in the State. Providers receiving pre-kindergarten expansion grants for 4-year-olds must limit class size to 20 students and achieve EXCELS Level 5, which requires a certified early education teacher and an aide in every classroom. Maryland has adopted a number of important policies and programs designed to improve the quality of its early childhood education program, including tuition reimbursement for pre-K teachers, salaries for those teachers comparable to those in the benchmark states and a fully implemented kindergarten readiness assessment system.

Despite these achievements, however, the benchmark countries provide greater subsidies in their early childhood education programs, set higher standards for early childhood faculty and pay them better, and offer a wider segment of the population access to the system.

#### *Putting support for families with young children into perspective*

In other OECD nations the poverty level is similar to the U.S. average. Maryland's poverty level is below the national average, although there are pockets of deep, intergenerational poverty, particularly in Baltimore City but also in other areas of the State. Yet both Maryland and the United States provide far less general support to families with young children than the countries whose students greatly outperform students in this country. That means that the children of low-income parents in the United States, even though their parents' incomes might be comparable to those of their peers in the top-performing countries, are much more likely to be hungry, homeless, subject to frequent eviction from their homes, sick, in need of dental care, traumatized, limited by a very small vocabulary. Never having had a quality early learning experience – and more likely to have been cared for at home or in the home of an untrained relative or friend—they arrive at the school house door behind their peers in numerous ways.

Thus, American schools, kindergartens and preschool institutions carry a much heavier burden than their counterparts in the top-performing countries. This means it is all the more important for Maryland to significantly increase its investment in early childhood education and address educational deficiencies as early as possible in a child's life rather than let these deficiencies fester and grow worse over time.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This Commission was charged primarily with addressing issues of pre-kindergarten, elementary, and secondary education. Yet, support for families before their 3- and 4-year old

children enter pre-K is critical, because the condition of the students coming into the public schools has such an important bearing on the capacity of the schools to get all students to high standards of academic accomplishment and because the cost of doing so in the schools is, to a very significant degree, a function of the condition of the young people coming into the schools. The Commission, therefore, has debated at some length the question of how much earlier than pre-K its recommendations should reach.

The Commission has concluded that it has an inescapable obligation to make recommendations designed to strengthen not only the early childhood education system but also the systems that provide other vital services in communities, especially those that serve mainly low-income residents, because, in the Commission's view, the health, education, and social service systems, at the least, are inextricably and directly related to the function of the schools and to their capacity to do their job.

The Commission wishes to call to the attention of the people of Maryland the very large gap between what our State does for families with young children more generally and what the top performers do for those families. It is impossible not to conclude that this fundamental difference in social policy not only creates a burden on our schools that schools in other leading countries do not have to bear, but it also makes it less likely than it is in these countries that our public schools can function as our national counterweight to poverty and serve as the route to the American dream for every child.

And so, though social policy on matters such as family leave, child and dependent care allowances, and maternal support and nutrition are beyond the purview of this Commission, we respectfully urge the people of Maryland to consider that it is in the interest of every Marylander to adopt policies in these arenas of public policy more like those of the benchmark nations. In particular, though strictly speaking outside the Commission's charge, we strongly urge that the State significantly expand its network of Judy Centers (this is not outside the Commission's scope) and Family Support Centers to reach all the low-income families and their children who need them.

1. Maryland must expand its current prekindergarten program so that all 4-year-olds, regardless of income, have an opportunity to enroll in a full-day program. This can be accomplished with a "diverse delivery" system composed of both public and private providers. The State should provide more funding for 4-year-olds from low-income families, including no charge for students from families at or below 300% of the federal poverty level, while higher-income families would be expected to pay a portion of the cost. Three-year-olds from low-income families should also have access to a full-day early childhood education program. Policies designed to support these changes would need to be phased in, with priority going to provision of a full-day program for special education children regardless of family income. Maryland should set a goal of having 80 percent of all four-year-olds in high quality early childhood education programs, with a higher proportion of 3-year-old children from low-income (families enrolled in high-quality programs).

2. Maryland must make sure that all pre-kindergarten programs, irrespective of whether they are provided by public agencies or private providers, are of high quality. To that end, Maryland should:
  - a. Ensure that the standards for approval of pre-K program personnel are comparable to those set in the countries with the benchmarked early childhood education systems and, if not, establish a timeline for full implementation of those standards.
  - b. Create a staffing system for approved Maryland early childhood providers that is fully integrated with the proposed statewide career ladder system described under Building Block #6
  - c. Strengthen the program of support for the professional development of pre-K teachers to enable them to earn the certificates defined by the new career ladder
  - d. Require public and private providers to achieve EXCELS Level 5 in order to receive State funding for 3 or 4-year-old students. Initially a provider must achieve at least EXCELS Level 3 with a plan approved by MSDE to achieve Level 5 within 5 years
3. In order to achieve the expansion of programs for 4-year-olds and low-income 3-year-olds in Recommendation 1, the supply of high quality providers and early childhood educators based in the community rather than in schools must be increased significantly. The Commission recognizes this will take time, but actions such as increasing incentives for teacher certification (perhaps establishing a bachelor degree program for educating children with and without disabilities from birth to age 8) and implementing a professional development system with incentives that provides pathways for current and prospective providers to increase their quality are critical. Chapter 377 of 2015 required a workgroup to develop a professional development plan for early childhood education. The workgroup's report, which can be found here ([http://earlychildhood.marylandpublicschools.org/system/files/filedepot/21/pd\\_master\\_plan\\_report\\_-\\_final\\_jan\\_21\\_2016.pdf](http://earlychildhood.marylandpublicschools.org/system/files/filedepot/21/pd_master_plan_report_-_final_jan_21_2016.pdf)), includes these and other recommendations worthy of consideration.
4. Maryland, which has already developed standards for children in grades 3-8, must ensure that these standards are expanded and aligned for 3- and 4 year-olds through grade 8.
5. Maryland must assess the school readiness of every child entering kindergarten from public and private providers, either using the existing instrument (Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, KRA) or a new instrument developed in collaboration with Maryland's teachers. As a first step, MSDE in collaboration with kindergarten teachers and early childhood experts should evaluate the current KRA, which has been significantly shortened since its first administration, to determine if it is an appropriate assessment for Maryland school readiness. This readiness assessment should be administered by kindergarten teachers and used to align the kindergarten program for

each kindergarten student in ways that will enable him or her to get on track and stay on track for college and career readiness. (see BB #3 and #4)

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