

BILL: House Bill 1441
TITLE: Early Childhood Education - Publicly Funded Prekindergarten Programs - Alterations
DATE: March 27, 2024
POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS
COMMITTEE: Education, Energy, and the Environment
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports House Bill 1441 because it would extend full funding for the Prekindergarten Expansion Grant Program through FY 2029, and make other needed improvements to the very complex implementation of the statewide expansion of full-day prekindergarten mandated by the Blueprint for Maryland's Future law.

The Blueprint establishes an incredibly ambitious expansion of publicly funded full-day prekindergarten. The program is intended, once fully implemented, to provide access for all three and four year old children from families with incomes of 300% or less of the federal poverty level (FPL). Specifically, the program guarantees the availability of slots in public schools or private facilities at no cost for parents and guardians of three and four year olds from households with incomes up to 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL) (\$77,460 for a family of three in 2024) and for four-year-olds from families with incomes between 300% and 600% FPL using a sliding scale. However, the availability of slots for eligible children is a function of the availability of slots in public and private programs that meet eligibility criteria and thereby qualify for approval and funding.

In order to accomplish this statewide expansion of public education, by two grade levels, the Kirwan Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education adopted a novel recommendation, enacted in the Blueprint, to have private providers of early education enroll publicly funded prekindergarten students. In fact, the Blueprint mandates that public school systems secure the services of local private providers to serve no less than 50% of eligible students. To date, the engagement with and participation of these private providers has yielded nowhere near this 50% mandated objective. To be clear, the State is not mandated to ensure this 50% share, only local school systems are. House bill 1441 would address these implementation challenges by establishing incremental 10% rates of growth in the private provision of slots. MABE requests an amendment to the bill, and Blueprint law, to reasonably reflect the essential partnership between the State, private providers, and local school systems. On page 6, in line 25, after "shall" insert **"MAKE REASONABLE EFFORTS TO"**. In this context, MABE also objects to the bill provision in lines 19-22 of page 7. The challenges in attracting private providers to participate in the publicly funded prekindergarten expansion program are many and varied, but not due to a local school system "not fully embracing the mixed delivery system." By contrast, MABE appreciates the bill's career ladder for private providers as an example of state action to facilitate private participation in the state program.

The prekindergarten expansion envisioned by the Blueprint is an enormous undertaking involving short- and long-term planning to address staffing full-day programs with highly qualified teachers and aides, and planning, designing and constructing the major renovations and new prekindergarten classrooms and facilities. State level programs and procedures necessary for the success of these efforts are lagging, at best. House Bill 1441 is intended to help ensure that all students can benefit from these efforts with the support of more clearly defined standards and sufficient state and local funding.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on House Bill 1441, with the amendments described above.