

---

R00A99

Early Childhood Development

---

Maryland State Department of Education

Response to the Analyst's Review and Recommendations

House Education and Economic Development Subcommittee –  
February 26, 2015

Senate Education, Business, and Administration Subcommittee –  
February 27, 2015



Lillian M. Lowery, Ed.D.  
State Superintendent of Schools

**The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) welcomes this opportunity to share with the Committee some of its success stories and to address questions raised by the analyst.**

**DECD should comment on what is driving the increase in the number of children on the waitlist for participation in the Child Care Subsidy Program.**

The waitlist in the Child Care Subsidy Program is a result of an increasing number of families/children otherwise eligible for the program, but not receiving services because the two remaining income brackets remain closed (i.e., income levels I and J, up to \$29,990 for a family of three). Available funding is being used to serve the families/children from the eight lowest income levels who continue to return to the program.

MSDE works closely with the Department of Budget and Management to monitor the participation of families in the program as part of the forecasting for future fiscal years. It also monitors federal funding levels to determine if the two highest income brackets can be opened without jeopardizing the sustainability of the program.

**DECD should comment on what is being done to increase the ratings of the participating programs.**

Participation in the Maryland EXCELS Rating System will be mandatory for all programs receiving child care subsidy reimbursement as of June 29, 2015.

As of February 24, 2015, 3,958 programs are registered and participating in Maryland EXCELS. Of those programs, 1,354 published Maryland EXCELS quality ratings. Published ratings occur within 12 months after the date of registration, when a program completes improvements and determines to publicly publicize its quality rating.

Three groups work with participating programs to offer support and technical assistance to increase quality ratings. MSDE Quality Assurance Specialists across the State provide on-site support to programs as they begin participating in Maryland EXCELS and progress through the quality levels. Support is offered in group and individual meetings at the family child care provider's home or the facility location. Regional Child Care Resource and Referral Centers provide training and technical assistance to programs to improve the quality of the program and move to higher rating levels within the system. Targeted supports are provided to programs located in Title I school districts as well as Focus and Priority school attendance areas that are serving children of high needs. The Maryland EXCELS system staff offers participating programs the opportunity to request technical assistance for specific criteria in the rating system. This request is made online and directed to the Regional Child Care Resource Center whose staff provides the tailored support needed to meet the specific standard and move to higher levels of

quality. Program Coordinators working with the Johns Hopkins University Center for Technology in Education provide assistance to programs as they utilize the online system to provide evidence and documentation in support of the quality ratings.

**DECD should comment on why child care subsidy funding is being unspent when such a significant number of children are waiting to receive the benefit. In addition, the division should discuss how federal funding for the program is awarded and expended, given the inconsistencies in the budgeting of federal funds since fiscal 2011. Finally, DECD should discuss what efforts are being made to eliminate the waitlist and reopen the remaining two income brackets for eligible families.**

Maryland receives approximately \$80 million in federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) that have a State match requirement. In FY 2014, the required CCDF match was \$54 million, of which \$37.8 million was provided in general funds and \$16.2 million in indirect match funds; a portion of the prekindergarten expenditures by local school systems. In FY 2012, as a result of expired ARRA funds, the Child Care Subsidy program experienced a significant decline in funding which led to the closing of all income brackets for low-wage earners (i.e., those families that are not receiving targeted cash assistance).

For most of FY 2014 and in FY 2015, all income eligible families within the first eight income brackets received child care subsidy vouchers. The projected increases in the CCPS for FY 2016 are the result of a combination of a 3% projected increase in participation and the new Federal policy requiring vouchers to be issued for a 12 month period. Issuing a full 12-month voucher results in an average increase per voucher.

When forecasting funding levels for the CCDF, projected participation rates must be considered in any decision to open income eligibility brackets. Participation in the program is expected to increase 17% by FY 2017. A large share of that increase is projected to be comprised of children from income eligible families. As a result, MSDE, working with the Administration, held the last two income brackets closed to avoid a potential FY 2017 deficit in the program.

**DECD should provide an update on the status of the TORFP and the department's plan for centralizing the case management services of the Child Care Subsidy Program. The division should also discuss how it intends to ensure that individuals who need to apply for a child care subsidy are not unduly burdened by severing that responsibility from other eligibility determinations made at local DSS offices.**

The TORFP was issued in November 2014 and responses were due on January 30, 2015. Two proposals were received and are currently in technical review. Once the technical and financial

evaluation is completed, a vendor will be selected. MSDE anticipates awarding a contract in early March 2015.

MSDE will work with the selected vendor and the Department of Human Resources, including the Local Departments of Social Services, as the current eligibility determination procedures transition to the new centralized process. The centralized eligibility determination process is scheduled to begin in July 2015.

Child Care Subsidy (CCS) customers will not experience any change in the way that they apply for CCS due to the change to centralized eligibility determination. The application process for child care subsidy will not change. Individuals seeking eligibility determination will continue to submit the application and necessary verifications by mail.

**MSDE should provide a status update on all RTTT – ELC projects, including the reasons for requesting the no-cost extensions. The department should also comment on the extent to which the issues with staffing and project delays have been resolved and whether any additional challenges will be identified in the Year 3 Annual Performance Report.**

Maryland's application included 10 thematic projects which strive to reduce to the readiness gap for low-income children, English language learners, and young children with disabilities through various strategies. Maryland's RTT-ELC has been designed to address these gaps by targeting supports mainly to early childhood programs in low-income neighborhoods and Title 1 attendance areas.

- Maryland's spotlight projects are the Maryland EXCELS quality rating and improvement system and the Ready for Kindergarten Early Childhood - Comprehensive Assessment System (R4K). The progress made in increasing access to quality care for at-risk children through EXCELS and measuring student growth through the R4K are key accomplishments of the RTT-ELC grant. Programs receive targeted technical assistance through EXCELS and as a result, the number of registered programs has increased and the quality of early childhood services for young children and their families has improved. Maryland can measure the skills and abilities of incoming kindergarteners against the new Maryland College and Career-Ready Standards by administering the R4K's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment during the first few weeks of kindergarten. Teachers and principals will be able to identify early gaps in achievement as a means for intervention and targeted early learning support. Children with special needs will be identified earlier through the Early Learning Assessment (ELA) - the formative assessment component of the R4K. The ELA will yield valuable information on student growth as part of the Child Outcomes Summary (COS) process, used with students with

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs).

Highlights of the remaining project successes are:

- Project 1 – Established local Early Childhood Advisory Councils to bring community support to the statewide RTT-ELC projects through locally designed activities that provide early learning opportunities and school readiness skills. All 24 jurisdictions are participating in this agenda.
- Project 3 - Quality capacity building was strengthened through the implementation of the Regional Child Care Resource and Referral Centers' *Early Childhood Breakthrough Centers*, Community Hubs, Preschool for All, Judy Center Satellite sites, and the special education coaching program, *Making Access Happen*, in Title 1 communities. These programs focused efforts on at-risk children and connecting and providing them with high quality services to meet their needs. All these programs have been operational since 2012 and will continue in Year 4 of the grant.
- Project 4 - The new Early Learning Standards are aligned with the Maryland College and Career Readiness standards and the existing Healthy Beginnings standards for children under 4. *Supporting Every Young Learner - Guide to Early Childhood Pedagogy* supports the implementation of the Early Learning Standards through evidence-based practices which will be disseminated to early childhood providers and public schools. In Year 4, it will also be enhanced through professional development modules being made available to programs and schools serving, children, birth to age 8. The Vocabulary Improvement of Language Enrichment Through Stories (VIOLETS), a language-based program addressing the so-called “word gap” experienced by many at-risk youngsters, and a preschool STEM program, implemented in early childhood programs serving mainly low income children and preschoolers with immigrant backgrounds, offer evidence-based interventions in preschool settings. Both programs have reached more than 250 classrooms and shown positive growth in learning for students in preschool, prekindergarten and kindergarten.
- Project 5 - The Professional Development component of the Maryland Model for School Readiness has been updated to include information on the Early Learning Standards, the Comprehensive Assessment System and the Early Learning assessment (ELA), and is being offered to child care providers.
- Project 7 - Child Development Innovations strategies focus on identifying children's mental health and/or developmental challenges and connecting professionals with

resources for these children. MSDE will propose regulations requiring all child care providers to administer developmental screenings for children in their care from birth to age five beginning July 1, 2016. Maryland has established a review process to recommend the use of five developmental screening instruments. One instrument, *Best Beginnings*, developed by the University of Maryland School of Psychiatry, was piloted through the RTT-ELC grant and met the validity and reliability standards established by the review committee. Another strategy provided pediatricians with training on recommended developmental screening tools for young patients. Finally, the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (SEFEL) professional development training is on line and available to families, and online training opportunities are being offered to providers serving children birth to age five.

- Project 8 - Family engagement and support strategies have been devised by the Coalition for Family Engagement which published the national recognized Maryland Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework. Parents and their rising kindergarteners from low-income neighborhoods and kindergarten teachers from Title I schools participated in Parent-Child Learning Parties, a program designed to support the successful transition from early childhood to public schools. *Reach Out and Read*, an early literacy and book distribution campaign by pediatricians across the state and Raising a Reader, a family literacy program in Title 1 schools, have exceeded their programmatic milestones and are highly praised by their participants.
- Project 9- Strategies to enhance child care workforce competency and leadership are being implemented by State approved trainers and community colleges through the new Workforce Competency and Standards Framework. The Maryland Approved Alternative Preparation Program (MAAPP) for Early Childhood Education generated its first 13 graduates, receiving teacher certification for Prek to Grade 3, and two additional cohorts are working to earn certification. The Task Force on Teacher Education in Early Childhood Education completed its work in Year 3 and submitted its recommendations, namely adding a dual certification in early childhood and special education for birth to age 8. This recommendation prompted the Professional Standards in Teacher Education Board (PSTEB) to create a workgroup to determine if regulatory changes are required. In addition, the recommendation prompted legislation mandating MSDE and MHEC develop a master plan to address the critical shortage of qualified professional teachers and child care providers.
- Project 10 - The Child Care Automated Tracking System (CCATS) portal is being expanded to include professional development services for early care and education providers including applications for grants, incentives, training approval and professional development plans. The Enrollment and Attendance Reporting System (EARS)

completed its development in Year 3 and is ready for piloting; it is an enhancement to CCATS and serves as an online system for licensed child care providers to record the attendance of children enrolled in their programs. In addition, the Early Childhood Data Warehouse (see chart below), which is the Longitudinal Data System (LDS) for children, birth to 5 years, will link data from several of the RTT-ELC programs and other data sources to established outcome measures in MSDE's MLDS. This will allow for analysis of connections between early care experiences and student achievement outcomes.

The ten projects comprise 698 specific tasks as outlined in Maryland's approved Scope of Work (SOW). As of December 31, 2014, after 36 months of implementation, 84.8 percent of all tasks have been completed on time in accordance with the project plan. Ninety percent of all milestones have been accomplished. While the original recruitment and procurement delays have been resolved, MSDE has been in contact with the U.S. Department of Education regarding its request for no-cost extension on a number of projects with direct services to students as well as the development of a new component to the R4K Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System. A formal request by MSDE must be submitted by May 2015.

The major challenges for Year 4, as addressed in the Year 3 Annual Progress Report, relate to the following:

- Continued demand in Maryland EXCELS impacting the sustainability costs;
- Improvements on the implementation of the KRA and the launch of the ELA in the spring 2015;
- Sustainability of human resources to maintain the level of quality in implementing the reforms in early childhood education beyond the grant period.

**MSDE should be prepared to discuss the issues encountered during the first administration of the KRA, progress made to resolve those issues, and preliminary findings from the readiness reports. The department should also comment on the impact participation in multiple state and local assessments over the course of a school year has on early learners and whether the KRA will replace the need for local assessments. DLS recommends the addition of budget language requiring a report on the improvements made to the KRA and any issues encountered with the fall 2015 administration of the exam. The report should also include an evaluation of the first administration of the ELA, as well.**

The development of Ready for Kindergarten (R4K): Maryland's Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System, which includes the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA), is a joint project between the Ohio and Maryland. The states are joined by two partners, the Johns Hopkins University Center for Technology in Education and WestEd, the project's assessment consultant. The first administration of the KRA in Maryland was completed in early November 2014 and the state and county reports will be available in April 2015. As part of the first year census administration of the KRA, a post assessment survey of teachers was requested

by MSDE and conducted by Johns Hopkins University Center for Technology in Education. The survey, with responses from approximately 1,300 teachers or 40% of all kindergarten teachers, revealed that those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- The KRA test materials were easy to use (79%)
- The KRA aligns well with classroom instruction (77%)
- The specific skills tested are age appropriate (70%)
- The online system for the KRA is comfortable and easy to use (85%)
- There was reliable and fast internet connectivity in the use of the online system (64%)
- Teachers spent less than 60 minutes on the administration per student for the eight week assessment window (67%)
- Teachers also administered one or several other local assessments during the KRA assessment window (84%)

While the majority of teachers' experiences with the KRA were positive, the results also point to the need for improving the system for the upcoming administration. MSDE has worked with its assessment and technology partners to address the teachers' concerns and improve the efficiency of the online system as follows:

- Shorten the number of KRA assessment items by 20% , thereby reducing the time needed to administer the test;
- Establish a workgroup with local school systems to address timing of local assessments and the KRA, exploring flexible assessment times (e.g., conducting parts of the KRA during staggered enrollment periods), and improving internet connectivity;
- Revise professional development activities to include strategies to integrate assessment items into the instructional day and schedule sessions closer to the time of the test administration.

## **Recommended Actions**

1. Add the following language to the general fund appropriation: , provided that \$100,000 of this appropriation made for the purpose of general administration may not be expended until the Division of Early Childhood Development within the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) submits a report to the budget committees on the Early Learning Assessment (ELA) and Kindergarten Readiness Assessments (KRA) associated with the Ready for Kindergarten: Maryland's Early Childhood Comprehensive System program. The report shall include an update of any improvements made to the KRA by MSDE, particularly with regard to identified connectivity issues, adjustments in the length of the assessment, and time required to administer the exam. The report should also identify any issues encountered and feedback received from fall 2015 administration of the KRA, in addition to reporting the percent of tests administered using paper and online. Finally, the report should include an evaluation of the first administration of the ELA, including any issues identified by educators and potential



resolutions. The report shall be submitted to the budget committees no later than December 15, 2015, and the budget committees shall have 45 days to review and comment. Funds restricted pending receipt of a report may not be transferred by budget amendment or otherwise to any other purpose and shall revert to the General Fund if the report is not submitted to the budget committees.

<b>Information Request</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Due Date</b>
Report on early learning assessments	MSDE	December 15, 2015

MSDE is happy to provide the requested information, but respectfully requests the deadline be extended to December 31, 2015. The additional time will ensure MSDE's report will include a comprehensive and accurate account of feedback received from the fall 2015 administration of the KRA. MSDE also respectfully asks the Budget Committees to be mindful of the number of recommended restrictions included in the Agency's budget analyses.