


TO: Members of the State Board of Education

FROM: Carey M. Wright, Ed.D., State Superintendent of Schools 

DATE: February 11, 2025

SUBJECT: Pre-K Expansion and EXCELS Quality Rating Systems

Purpose

As Maryland expands access to high-quality pre-kindergarten educational programming and school readiness services for three-year-old and four-year-old students, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) seeks to support pre-kindergarten providers. In an effort to be responsive to common challenges and opportunities in expanding pre-kindergarten, MSDE plans to bring to the State Board options for changes that can help achieve these goals sooner. At February's State Board meeting, MSDE intends to lay the groundwork for future proposals for administrative and policy changes.

Background

Through the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, MSDE is charged with expanding access to pre-kindergarten (pre-K) through a mixed delivery model. The mixed delivery pre-K model offers pre-kindergarten programs in a variety of settings to meet the needs of families.

The settings include local education agencies (LEAs) as well as non-LEA settings, such as Head Start programs, community-based child care centers, family child care homes, and private schools.

In January 2025, the AIB and State Board jointly adopted a policy establishing the following implementation direction to maximize the number of students served in Maryland's mixed delivery pre-kindergarten system:

1. Public providers focus on ensuring all eligible Tier I four-year-olds are served.
2. Private providers, including Head Start providers, focus on serving Tier I three-year-olds and Tier II and Tier III four-year-olds.
3. Public providers may choose to serve Tier II and III four-year-olds. Those districts that serve Tier II and III four-year-olds may choose to collect the family share, but are not required to do so.

Executive Summary

The Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) Expansion Grant is a competitive grant program that provides funding for LEAs and private providers to administer high-quality pre-kindergarten and school readiness services throughout the State for children and their families in alignment with The Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

Maryland EXCELS is the state quality rating and improvement system. Available for licensed child care programs, registered family homes, and public pre-kindergarten programs (local education agencies),

Maryland EXCELS provides standards that support increased quality improvement and the implementation of best practices.

Action

No action is required; this information is for discussion only.

Attachments

Pre-K Expansion and EXCELS Quality Rating Systems.pptx

DIVISION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

Pre-Kindergarten Expansion and Maryland EXCELS

February 11, 2025

Presented By | Jena Smith and Tara Phillips, Interim Assistant State Superintendents
Dr. Nykia Washington, Pre-Kindergarten and Mixed Delivery Programs Manager

A teacher with curly blonde hair, wearing a green shirt, is giving a high-five to a young student with curly dark hair wearing a yellow and black striped shirt. They are in a classroom with other students in the background.

Presentation Outline

1. Mixed Delivery Model
2. Pre-K Expansion Grant
3. Maryland EXCELS

Pre-Kindergarten Mixed Delivery Model

MSDE expands access to Pre-K through a mixed delivery model.

- The mixed delivery Pre-K model offers preschool programs in a variety of settings to meet the needs of families.
- The settings include LEAs as well as non-LEA settings, such as:
 - Head Start programs,
 - community-based child care centers,
 - family child care homes, and
 - private schools.

Pre-Kindergarten Mixed Delivery Policy

Joint AIB & State Board Policy Adopted in January 2025:

The AIB and SBOE establish the following implementation direction to maximize the number of students served in Maryland's mixed delivery prekindergarten system:

1. Public providers focus on ensuring all eligible Tier I four-year-olds are served.
2. Private providers, including Head Start providers, focus on serving Tier I three-year-olds and Tier II and Tier III four-year-olds.
3. Public providers may choose to serve Tier II and III four-year-olds. Those districts that serve Tier II and III four-year-olds may choose to collect the family share, but are not required to do so.

Pre-Kindergarten Expansion Grant Overview

The Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) Expansion Grant is a competitive grant program that provides funding for local education agencies (LEAs) and private providers to administer high-quality pre-kindergarten and school readiness services throughout the State for children and their families in alignment with The Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

The purpose is to broaden availability and expand access to high-quality pre-kindergarten educational programming and school readiness services for three-year-old and four-year-old students from families with household incomes up to 300% of Federal Poverty Level (FPL).

Expansion Grant Eligibility

This funding opportunity is designed for those who deliver pre-kindergarten services, including:

Local Education Agencies (LEAS)	Private Providers	Head Start Programs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•LEAs and qualified vendors as defined in COMAR 13A.06.02•Participate in Maryland EXCELS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Hold a valid license or registration, and•No serious health or safety violations in the last year (COMAR 13A.06.02).	Federally funded slots are being supplemented with State Pre-K Funds.

Expansion Grant Applications

Expansion Grant applications for FY 2026 must be completed and submitted electronically through the online system.

- Applicants must attach any supporting documentation as appendices within the electronic application.

A current grantee is considered "in good standing" if the following conditions are met:

- Maintains a Lead Teacher that meets Blueprint requirements
- Maintains a minimum Maryland EXCELS quality rating of Level 3 or higher
- In compliance with grant reporting requirements and fiscal guidelines
- Not under a corrective action plan for fiscal concerns or instructional concerns

Note: The paper application will be available online and can be used as a worksheet or reference; however, the application must be submitted electronically through the online system.

Maryland EXCELS: Quality Rating and Improvement System

- Currently **70% of eligible licensed child care programs** - including registered family child care homes - are participating in **Maryland EXCELS**.
- Over the past three fiscal years, the number of programs submitting applications to participate in Maryland EXCELS has continued increase.
 - In FY22, **474** programs **joined** Maryland EXCELS.
 - In FY24, **571** programs **joined** Maryland EXCELS.
- FY25 has continued to show a steady increase in the number of programs submitting applications to participate in Maryland EXCELS. In quarter 1, **202 programs** submitted applications to participate.
- In FY24, **34% of all** programs participating in Maryland EXCELS had a published **rating of 3, 4, or 5**.
- **561** child care centers, school-age only programs, and public prekindergarten programs hold **current** Maryland Accreditation, and **384** programs are actively **pursuing** Maryland Accreditation.
- On May 1, 2024, Maryland Accreditation **moved** from a **three-year to a five-year** accreditation cycle.

What is the Difference?

Accreditation **VS.** Quality Indicators

Programs pursuing accreditation use the following tools:

- Maryland Accreditation Standards for **early childhood** and **school age programs**
- Self-Appraisal including input from staff and families
- **Program Improvement Plan**

The EXCELS indicators consider the learning environment, interactions with students, and implementation.

Key Features of the Quality Rating and Improvement System



- Activities support each and every child's individual needs
- Family-teacher conferences are offered



- Children's developmental progress is observed
- 2+ opportunities for families to engage in the program
- Activities informed by early learning guidelines
- Family-teacher conferences are offered at least once a year
- Activities support each and every child's individual need

Key Features of the Quality Rating and Improvement System



- Children's developmental progress is measured
- Staff have increased training and experience
- 3+ opportunities for families to engage in the program
- Activities informed by early learning guidelines
- Family-teacher conferences offered at least once a year
- Activities support each and every child's individual needs
- Program improvement planning required



- Children's developmental progress measured and linked to curriculum
- Staff have higher levels of training and experience
- Continuous improvement process informed by independent assessors using CLASS tool
- Program has begun, national or state accreditation
- 4+ opportunities for families to engage in the program
- Activities aligned with a state recommended curriculum
- Family-teacher conferences offered at least twice per year
- Activities support each and every child's individual needs

Key Features of the Quality Rating and Improvement System



- Children's developmental progress assessed with multiple measures and linked to curriculum
- Staff meet highest levels of training and experience
- Continuous quality improvement process informed by independent assessors using CLASS tool
- State or national accreditation achieved
- 5+ opportunities for families to engage in the program
- State recommended curriculum used
- Family-teacher conferences offered at least twice per year
- Activities support each and every child's individual needs

Maryland EXCELS in Pre-K Expansion

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future requires all public schools and any child care programs wishing to provide Public Pre-K services to publish a Maryland EXCELS Quality Rating 5 within five years of receiving funds.

To participate in the Pre-K Expansion and Blueprint Formula grants, programs must be:

- Published at Level 3 with a plan approved by MSDE to achieve Level 5 within five years; or
- Published at level 4 with a plan approved by MSDE to achieve Level 5 within 5 years; or
- Published at Level 5 with a plan to maintain this level.

The Maryland EXCELS team helps child care and public school programs improve quality and increase ratings by offering research-based standards for all program types, as well as providing free training, workgroups, one-on-one assistance, and an online toolkit.