



Voices from the Field: Stakeholder Perspectives on Maryland's Early Childhood Care and Education System

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Policy Equity Group, LLC
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ANNE ARUNDEL & HOWARD COUNTIES

TOWN HALL MEETING

Thursday, May 9th
Point Pleasant Resource Center
1450 Furnace Road
Glen Burnie, MD 21060

Join the conversation on Facebook & Twitter with #MDListens

Morning Session 8:30-11:30AM
Evening Session 5:00-8:00PM

Streaming live at facebook.com/MdEarlyChildhood

Early Childhood Town Hall Meeting

BALTIMORE CITY & BALTIMORE COUNTY

Owings Mills Branch of the Baltimore County Public Library

Thursday, April 4th

Morning Session 9:00-11:30AM
Evening Session 5:00-8:00PM

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TOWN HALL MEETING

CAROLINE, DORCHESTER, KENT, QUEEN ANNE'S & TALBOT COUNTIES

Chesapeake College

Tuesday, April 16th

Morning Session 8:30-11:30AM
Evening Session 5:00-8:00PM

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TOWN HALL MEETING

CALVERT, CHARLES & ST. MARY'S COUNTIES

Wednesday, May 15th
Calvert County Public Library

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Morning Session 9:00-11:30AM
Evening Session 5:00-8:00PM

Streaming live at facebook.com/MdEarlyChildhood

TOWN HALL MEETING

CECIL & HARFORD COUNTIES

Tuesday, May 7th
The Center for Educational Opportunity in Aberdeen

Morning Session 8:30-11:30AM
Evening Session 5:00-8:00PM

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TOWN HALL MEETING

MONTGOMERY COUNTY

Friday, May 17th
Montgomery College
Takoma Park/ Silver Spring Campus
Amphitheater - HC Building

Morning Session 8:30-11:30AM
Evening Session 5:00-8:00PM

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TOWN HALL MEETING

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY

Thursday, May 16th
Prince George's County & Adelphi Judy Centers at Cool Spring Elementary School

Morning Session 8:30-11:30AM
Evening Session 5:00-8:00PM

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TOWN HALL MEETING

SOMERSET, WICOMICO & WORCESTER COUNTIES

Thursday, April 25th
Wor-Wic Community College

Morning Session 8:30-11:30AM
Evening Session 5:00-8:00pm

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TOWN HALL MEETING FOR ALLEGANY, CARROLL, FREDERICK, GARRETT & WASHINGTON COUNTIES

Join the conversation on Twitter and Facebook with #MDListens

Tuesday, March 26th
8:30AM-8:00PM



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“In order for us to get the children ready for their classrooms, it has to be a community working together. If it’s not, it’s just not going to work.”

—*Allegheny, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

Introduction

In 2019, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) was awarded a \$10.6 million federal grant through the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) program. A primary goal of the grant is to create a strategic plan that outlines how the state will coordinate existing early childhood care and education (ECE) programs that prepare low-income children for kindergarten. To inform the strategic plan, the state conducted a statewide early childhood needs assessment that included a series of Town Hall meetings. These Town Hall meetings were used to obtain a first-hand perspective on the needs of Maryland’s children and families; issues that impacted access to services and high-quality ECE programs; and challenges with the coordination, collaboration, and alignment between the ECE and public school systems.

This report summarizes the key takeaways from Maryland stakeholders including parents, early childhood educators, administrators, members of the higher education community, local business and government leaders, advocates, and other stakeholders. Topic areas for which MSDE sought input included:

- Challenges faced by families when raising young children in Maryland;
- Issues related to accessing services and high-quality ECE programs;
- Ways in which to improve the quality of ECE programs;
- Connections and transitions between ECE programs and public school systems; and
- The level of coordination and collaboration among service delivery models and funding streams.

The Town Hall meetings provided Maryland stakeholders with the opportunity to provide input on the strengths and challenges of the state’s ECE system. Town Hall participants provided personal and detailed perspectives on the needs of children and families in the state and their experiences working with the state’s programs that prepare children for kindergarten. This report documents these perspectives and provides recommendations to support the state’s strategic planning effort.

Methodology

From March 26 to May 17, 2019, 18 Town Hall meetings were conducted across nine sites in Maryland (See **Figure 1**). The sites were chosen to ensure broad participation from the state’s different geographic regions. For each site, a Town Hall meeting was held in the morning and the evening to provide as much access as possible for stakeholders who wished to attend. When possible, the meetings were also livestreamed using Facebook Live to provide stakeholders with an opportunity to participate remotely.

Across the Town Hall meetings, 686 people attended in person. The breakdown of participants by site and session are included in **Table 1**. The Town Hall discussions were taped, transcribed, and analyzed to create this summary report. Participants who attended the meetings also had the opportunity to fill out a survey at the end of each Town Hall session, providing another way to offer input for those who did not get a chance to speak (or preferred not to speak) at the meetings. The data from the surveys is not included in this report but is incorporated into the state’s larger needs assessment report.

Each Town Hall began with presentations from MSDE, the Maryland Department of Health, and a representative of the local Maryland Department of Human Services agency. These presentations provided more details about the PDG B-5 grant, outlined the major child and family services provided by each agency, and updated participants on state-level initiatives and activities.

Each Town Hall meeting lasted 2.5 hours and a protocol was developed to guide the Town Hall conversations (See **Appendix A**). Participants were asked a number of questions about the needs of children and families in Maryland, access to services, the quality of ECE settings, transitions from ECE settings to public schools, and their ECE information and data needs.

Figure 1. Maryland Town Hall Meeting Locations



Interpreting the Findings

There are two points to keep in mind when reading the findings from the Town Hall meetings. First, while MSDE worked hard to ensure broad representation across the state, Town Hall participants are a self-selected sample. In other words, participants decided whether they would attend the Town Hall meetings and the group that attended most likely consisted of individuals who felt most strongly about Maryland’s ECE system or who had a specific interest or issue with one or more of the state’s programs. As such, the findings should be considered representative of the most engaged portion of the Maryland stakeholder community and not necessarily the Maryland stakeholder community overall. Nonetheless, the findings from the Town Hall participants provide a detailed and often passionate account of the key strengths and challenges of Maryland’s ECE system.

Second, the findings organize and summarize the conversations that took place across the Town Hall meetings. In some cases, it is unclear how widespread a specific issue was or whether it represented a unique experience of an individual stakeholder. In general, the findings in the report focus on areas in which there was some agreement in a Town Hall meeting or across Town Hall meetings that an issue or challenge existed. It will be important to look at these findings within the context of other aspects of the needs assessment process including the analysis of state-level data, the stakeholder surveys, and findings from the focus groups to determine the most pressing needs of stakeholders and challenges with the system.

Findings

Town Hall meetings yielded a wealth of information on a range of topics related to Maryland’s ECE system. Overall, participants were positive about the work that the state was doing and appreciative for the opportunity to engage in conversations with the agencies. At the same time, participants highlighted a number of systemic issues that they wanted the state to address.

In addition to serving as a venue to express needs, the Town Hall meetings provided the opportunity for information-sharing among participants, particularly around the availability of services. As one Prince George’s County Town Hall participant noted, “...as a leader of

Table 1. Town Hall Participants by Site

Site	Morning Session	Evening Session	Total
Hagerstown	67	7	74
Owings Mills	75	36	111
Wye Mills	48	16	64
Salisbury	72	14	86
Aberdeen	47	21	68
Glen Burnie	59	11	70
Prince Frederick	28	28	56
Hyattsville	37	24	61
Silver Spring	56	40	96
TOTAL	489	197	686

the building, they're looking to me for answers. And there are so many of you today that shared resources that we have in this district that I knew nothing about.”

The Town Hall comments hit on numerous aspects of Maryland's ECE system, including system capacity, the lack of coordination, regulatory burden, and the significant financial, developmental, social-emotional, and educational needs of Maryland's children and families. In addition, numerous issues were raised by Maryland's ECE provider community. The findings are discussed in detail below.

This part of the report is organized around key conversations that emerged during the Town Hall meetings. The subsections that follow address the following topics:

- Challenges faced by Maryland's vulnerable children and families
- Challenges faced by Maryland's ECE programs and providers
- Issues affecting access to programs and services that strengthen, engage, and stabilize families
- Issues affecting the supply of and access to high-quality ECE providers
- State initiatives to improve the quality of ECE programs and providers
- Early childhood/public school connections and transitions; and
- Coordination and collaboration of Maryland programs and services to support vulnerable families.

Given that the Town Hall conversations focused on Maryland's ECE system, there is a good deal of overlap in the themes that came to the forefront in the stakeholder conversations. For example, a key challenge for providers is finding qualified early childhood educators, which is also a fundamental issue related to quality. Every effort was made to logically organize the themes in the Town Hall report in a way that accurately reflects the perspectives of the stakeholders. However, it is important to note that the themes could have been organized differently and there may be some overlap in content across the themes.

Stakeholder Perspectives on the Challenges Faced by Maryland's Vulnerable Children and Families

Perhaps the most important role of the Town Hall meetings was to obtain a first-hand account of the needs of children, families, providers, and other stakeholders in Maryland. Participants articulated a number of pressing needs as well as suggestions for addressing them. Specifically, Town Hall participants discussed:

- The implications of poverty, financial instability, and homelessness on child well-being, development, and learning;
- The opioid crisis and drug addiction;
- Transportation as a barrier to accessing services;
- Infant and early childhood mental health issues; and
- Language barriers.

In response to these needs, stakeholders discussed the importance of taking a two-generation approach where children are supported with direct services, as well as services that stabilize and strengthen their families.

The Implications of Poverty, Financial Instability, and Homelessness

Town Hall participants talked about poverty as the “root cause” of the issues that families were experiencing. Many families may not have the ability to access the early childhood services they need if it means taking time off of work or spending their limited resources to travel to a social service provider. Participants also spoke about the need to stabilize families before they are ready to address issues like school readiness and helping their children prepare for kindergarten. As one Town Hall participant noted:

“...not only are the children coming to their programs hungry, tired...they don't have clean clothes... So we're talking really basic needs here and social emotional needs, especially. ...It's heartbreaking, it really is...But I think that when we look and take it to the next level and look at school readiness, it doesn't have a whole lot of meaning to families who are struggling for survival. ...it's really a difficult place out there.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

Other Town Hall participants described in detail the negative consequences of poverty and the implications for accessing services:

“But we have children who live in homes where individual bedrooms are rented out to families and you know, six families living in a home where the mom might work for one family and there was no father around. And she works at night and the children are locked in the bedroom and she pays with her body and her cooking to pay her portion of the rent. And you have 30 people living in their household and the children do not even know each other’s names. Yet, we have millionaires who live down the road.”

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

“So some of the demands that we place on families...which is built on the middle class framework, don’t work because they have to make decisions about: do I [work]...today so I can pay X, Y, and Z so I can’t go to the doctor... So we put them in that...vice grip and no matter what we do [won’t work] until we figure out [how to]... bring...the mountain to Mohammad, in essence. You know, mobile services or things located within neighborhoods and communities.”

—Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant

“We can put as many services out there, but if we can’t have easier ways to access them, it’s just going to make it more and more difficult.”

—Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant

Several participants from the more urban areas of the state talked about the number of homeless families in their communities. One participant said:

“There are so many homeless families in this city. They might not see themselves as homeless, but they are. They’re couch surfing. They don’t really have a house or a home. They have a roof over their heads. ...They may be in one neighborhood for three months, and after that live with another family member for the next six months. So that’s a huge need.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

Opioid Crisis/Drug Addiction

The impacts of the opioid crisis and drug addiction on the children and families were mentioned by several participants across the Town Hall meetings. Discussions centered around the impact of addiction on children, many of whom are born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS), which occurs when a baby withdraws after birth from the drugs they are exposed to during pregnancy. Participants also spoke about how the opioid epidemic causes a “trickle-down effect of trauma on our children and the vicarious trauma that our educators are dealing with as well” as a result of working with these children. Another participant noted that the impacts go beyond a child’s brain development, saying:

“...it impacts school readiness, impacts the whole structure of the family. Then, if you have a parent that’s going away to rehab... you have that separation issue and the inability to attach to that...parent figure. So, then we have a child that arrives at four or five years old with a multitude of concerns that we feel like we’re trying to build capacities so we can adequately assist that child. So, now we’re into social work, we’re into mental health, we’re into teaching...”

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

These conditions can manifest in additional behavioral challenges in the classroom, requiring early intervention in early childhood settings.

Participants suggested that the state look into better coordination of the early childhood system to provide the services needed to address these critical issues associated with addiction. For example, one participant noted:

“What would we suggest that the state do as an intervention or as a support? I’m going to just again say, put weight and time and effort behind the Judy Centers. I mean honestly, they are the key to becoming hubs in our communities and providing resources for families. They could have the capacity to help families become connected with opioid resources and interventions and programs and things like that.”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Other Town Hall participants discussed the strain that drug addiction places on the system and the need for additional services:

“And the impact of this drug crisis on the infant toddler program is dramatic. First of all, we know that the infant toddler programs in the state of Maryland are not fully funded. The impact of trying to find the services for these children who are born drug addicted, which has increased significantly, is very hard... And oftentimes our first evaluation of these children, they need physical therapy from the beginning, which we have a shortage of those kinds of providers.... So they’re not getting services that they need, crucially need, very early on.”

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

“In Harford County, we are dealing with a major crisis as everyone else is. And we’ve had a substance abuse exposed newborn group that’s actually working because the percentages of mothers that are having babies that are opioid addicted, it’s just skyrocketed.Just to be clear that in the next five or six years, the school system may be dealing with the backlash from that and the challenges that we have, and how do we get the supports into place now.”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Transportation

Across the Town Hall meetings, participants repeatedly cited transportation as a need and a primary barrier to families accessing services. Families with young children face challenges with taking their children to early childhood programs, going to work, and attending appointments at the social service agency. Some providers also noted the impact of transportation issues on the increased use of unregulated care. For example, a Caroline County participant said, “And when you have very limited care and you have parents without transportation, the capacity...to get their children to child care and then to get to work is a real issue. And so where child care is, where family daycare homes are really impacts whether or not parents can use regulated care.” For families in crisis, participants discussed how basic needs, like transportation, must be met first before attempting to address other needs like early care and education. When asked about the most pressing family needs, one Town Hall participant replied:

“I’d go with the transportation issue. ...we tried to do in-home parent education but we are putting out fires for these families, or helping the families put out their own fires. I have many families in deep crisis about subsistence needs whether it’s transportation, food, housing, where they’re going to live. And so, education and parenting education is not a priority, understandably. But we have...a lot of families in crisis here...in Anne Arundel County and need to meet those subsistence needs in order to meet the other needs.”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

Other Town Hall participants mentioned how transportation barriers impacted access to all types of services including health, mental health, child nutrition, prenatal care, and early literacy services:

“I just wanted to add to what [name] was saying about transportation, because our children can’t get to mental health appointments or doctor’s appointments. So, it’s very difficult. We have parents who need to get to places, but they can’t get there.... They don’t have the access to them because they can’t get there altogether.”

—*Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant*

Another Town Hall participation discussed a similar issue:

“...and my biggest concern is access to quality programs...because I teach in an area where there’s not a lot of public transportation. And quite frankly a lot of our parents can’t get up, can’t take the bus, get back on the bus.... So, we’ve had a big decrease [in service participation], at least at my school...”

—*Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant*

Town Hall participants also discussed strategies that can help to address transportation as a barrier. For example, it was suggested that the state increase the number of in-home services offered to families or offer transportation support similar to medical assistance transportation, which is available for families who receive Medicaid to take them to medical appointments. A participant from Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s and Talbot Counties discussed her own solution: “...we go as far as actually bringing [case workers] to our [child care] centers for the families because of transportation. So we will have the health department and everybody come together to support the families.”

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Issues

Participants spoke about the growing number of children with infant and early childhood mental health issues across the state and the need for more services. There was a perception among Town Hall participants that more children are coming into early childhood programs having experienced trauma or NAS, which is impacting their ability to self-regulate and learn. Participants talked about the increase in behavioral challenges seen in the classroom and the need for staff to be adequately prepared to handle these situations. Participants noted:

“I’ve been in child care for almost 20 years now and what I see in classrooms is so different from when I started working. The trauma and the behavior and everything that’s going on, just the way that our world and society is right now, it is being exhibited in our classrooms...”

—*Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant*

“So it’s really, really becoming more of a concern because we’re seeing the trauma that these kids are coming into the classroom with. We’re seeing the trauma that’s going on at home.”

—*Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties Town Hall Participant*

“One of the things we’ve seen in my program is an increase of children with challenging behaviors. We’re in need of more help with social and emotional development. We could use some coaching, not just training because typically what we find with training is they come, we do the training...but when you have a child that is really in trauma...exhibiting challenging behaviors in the classroom...could be harmful to themselves, harmful to others, we’d like to keep that child in care as much as possible and help that child. But we really need additional...support for that.”

—*Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant*

A participant from the Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall spoke about the trauma faced by undocumented immigrants: “the ACEs [Adverse Childhood Experiences] and the trauma that brought them here and then trying to get services” was a major source of stress for these children and their families. (The need for staff training on trauma-informed care is found in the Quality section that follows.)

Language Barriers

Many Town Hall participants brought up the increase in the number of non-English speaking families with children and the implications for accessing services. Participants noted that language was a significant barrier for families in finding services, resources, trainings, and early literacy materials, and suggested that these services for families be provided in additional languages. While Spanish translations of materials are typically available, participants mentioned the need to translate materials into other languages as well (e.g., Mandarin, Farsi, Korean, etc.). As one participant noted:

“And the other part is that people always ask me, do you have this in another language? Well, no, we rarely do. And if we do, it’s Spanish. So if you have all this money, taking the time to make these videos and make them in like the top five languages so that you have it in Spanish and you have it in Farsi, and Korean, and Chinese....”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

Taking a Two-Generation Approach

In response to the discussion about the needs of Maryland’s children and families, Maryland Town Hall participants discussed the need for better coordination of services organized in a two-generation approach that addresses family/parent needs along with the needs of individual children. One participant noted:

“Increasingly, it’s clear to me, working in the field as long as I have, a two-generation approach really is something we need to embrace and not just talk about... I know resources are limited, and because of that, it may be more enticing to think about what are we currently doing, how can we combine functions [and] how can we work better with one another where we’re doing some similar things.”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

In addition, Town Hall participants discussed the need for a trauma-informed two-generation approach to better support children and families:

“I...believe that most families do care but often times they are so caught up in the tyranny of the moment trying to just survive...And I think as service providers we need to be trauma-informed so that we stop looking at people as what’s wrong with you versus what’s happened to you and what can we do to help and support you.”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

Similarly, another participant explained:

“...it’s only through families beginning to trust us and welcoming us into their homes do we begin to get all the pieces. It feels like when we first go in that we’ve been handed a thousand-piece puzzle, but the only five pieces that we have are the five pieces that we’ve gotten from our partners and from what the families have told us, it takes time to get the rest of the pieces so you can get a complete picture.”

—Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant

Within the context of this two-generation approach, Town Hall participants also suggested that the state, providers, and other stakeholders do a better job working with families as equal partners in supporting children. As one participant noted:

“I hear a lot of what’s done to children and for children as if they are like lump[s] of clay...and the parents have to be maneuvered around to do what’s best for children. And even when I was in the classroom, all of my parents had my same respect as they are the expert on your child. I don’t know more about your child and what your child needs because I am the teacher with this “degree.” No, we have to work together.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

The MSDE representative discussed that Maryland’s PDG B-5 grant did include initiatives to engage, educate, and support parents and discussed a partnership with Maryland Public Television to enhance public awareness about the importance of early care and education. Town Hall participants encouraged MSDE to think of alternative methods of connecting with parents (billboards, social media, etc.) given that residents in the western part of the state watch the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) station out of Pittsburgh and that low-income families do not watch PBS altogether. As one participant from the Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall meeting noted, “...advertising on PBS is not how we’re going to reach our crowd that really need[s] it.”

Stakeholder Perspectives on the Challenges Faced by Maryland’s ECE Programs and Providers

Town Hall representatives from Maryland’s ECE provider community discussed the pressing needs of the state’s child care providers. These included:

- The need for more teachers that meet state credentials;
- Professional development that is easier for providers to access and that is less costly;
- A better understanding by the state of the impact of MSDE policies on providers’ sustainability as small businesses;
- The need for more bilingual teachers, as well as more support and professional development to serve children who speak languages other than English; and
- A number of needs specific to family child care providers, including their desire to be seen and respected as early childhood professionals, to be more integrated into the state’s mixed delivery system, and to have a closer partnership with MSDE.

Needs related to the workforce and professional development are discussed in the Quality section.

Need for More Teachers who have Credentials Beyond the Basic Licensure Levels

Given the professional development and compensation issues, it is not surprising that Town Hall participants talked about not being able to find teachers who had credentials that went beyond the training that was needed for basic licensing. While many early childhood professionals take advantage of Maryland’s tuition assistance program, the Child Care Career and Professional Development Fund (CCCP-DF), to obtain a college degree, child care programs still face a significant shortage of credentialed teachers. As one Town Hall participant from the Baltimore City and Baltimore County Town Hall summed it up: “We have a staffing crisis in early childhood education. There’s no other way to define it or state it.”

Indeed, the compensation issues and competition with more lucrative jobs outside of the ECE field are creating a shortage of high-quality teachers in Maryland. This shortage significantly impacts the ability of providers to improve their Maryland EXCELS. One Town Hall participant noted:

“Quality initiatives require staff that has levels that go beyond the basic licensure level. I’m having, and my colleagues in Anne Arundel County, are having a very difficult time, almost impossible time finding staff who meet those qualifications.”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

Need for Professional Development that is Convenient and Affordable to Providers

Throughout the Town Hall meetings, there was a robust discussion on training and professional development and the best ways to instill early childhood educators with the knowledge and skills to support the children with whom they work. Maryland's early childhood educators can access a range of professional development and in-service training opportunities through Maryland EXCELS, Maryland Family Network, Judy Centers, regional Child Care Resource Centers, and other training organizations around the state. However, Town Hall participants noted that trainings are not organized or scaffolded to help providers progress towards a deeper understanding and skill acquisition and often do not count toward a credential or degree. Participants also suggested that the state should consider relying more heavily on coaching models to support ECE professionals over one-time trainings. Finally, participants discussed how trainings were often offered at times that were inconvenient for programs and providers and also suggested areas where they would want additional training.

Overall, Town Hall participants were positive about Maryland's professional development and training, citing numerous trainings that have helped them in their work. The main concern regarding the system was the need to better coordinate the trainings and organize them so that they build on one another and also count toward a progression of credentials, including degrees. MSDE acknowledged that this was an important issue to address, and noted:

“Then also we're looking at ways in which we can redesign our career ladder program so that we guide folks into getting the CDA first instead of what I've heard you say [is] a collection of random coursework classes that don't really help them or amount to anything to further them along that career. So where they could start with the CDA, build that into an AA. A lot of the community colleges now are folding that into units for the AA and we're working to engage more in that work, as well as the Montgomery colleges have, for example, an online AA that could help in the training that you mentioned earlier and then folding that into a BA and making these articulation agreements very transparent and clear and accessible for folks.”

—MSDE Representatives at the Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall

With regard to the training coordination issue, Town Hall participants also suggested that the state explore alternative credentialing models. They cited, as an example, early childhood professionals with advanced degrees that have immigrated from other countries who do not get credit for the degree because it is from another country, and also highlighted experienced teachers who do not have the time, desire, or resources to go back to college to obtain a degree.

In addition to coordinating the training, participants discussed how coaching models rather than one-off trainings are more effective in changing teacher behavior in the classroom. Town Hall participants made the clear distinction between training sessions, which they saw as less effective, and coaching models that better support early childhood professionals. Individuals spoke about the value of peer-to-peer mentoring and the need for more coaching models to be used as part of the state's professional development delivery system. One participant from the Caroline, Dorchester, Queen Anne's and Talbot Counties noted, “...one-on-one coaching and training is so beneficial to staff who don't have a degree in this and who don't have all the support systems.” In a conversation on coaching in the Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's Counties Town Hall, one participant noted, “I cannot agree with you more. Coaching, coaching, coaching. Even though I do use the resource center... I do think a little bit more time in-home coaching [would be helpful].” Another Town Hall participant noted, “I will speak on one of the things I feel could be very beneficial to staff that are at centers that perhaps don't have formal education. Theory of pedagogy would be the utilization of a strength-based coaching...”

Town Hall participants also highlighted time and again the need for a flexible training schedule so that frontline staff can receive professional development on evenings and weekends. However, participants also noted the burden on providers of having to participate in training outside of normal work hours. A potential funding pool for substitutes was considered a helpful solution to allow staff to engage

in professional development opportunities during work hours without compromising the program's group size and ratio requirements. A number of Town Hall participants discussed the burden of training on early childhood educators:

“As far as how to best support the family child care providers and the centers, I think the number one thing that they need is training and access to good training. But as was mentioned earlier, child care providers work extremely long days and they're exhausted. And so having training in the evening or the weekends that cuts into their family time or more time that they need for other things [won't work].”

—*Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

“They're coming to us after working all day and sitting through a training 6:30 to 9:30 at night.”

—*Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant*

“The child care providers have children from early morning to late evening and then they're expected to get training beyond that rather than go during the day and have someone that fills for them who is qualified to do the job. And I think our child care providers are exhausted.”

—*Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

The suggestion of paid substitutes came up numerous times across the Town Hall meetings:

“So I don't know if there's a way for us to pay for their substitutes while they can go to trainings during the day. They would probably love to have a little break from their day-to-day routine and to be able to network with other adults and other professionals. To be able to attend training like that I think would be a good thing.”

—*Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

“...anybody who is in licensed care has the requirement to have a certain number of people in the classroom every day. So, and we don't get to have, a pool of subs that we could call in for it when there's professional trainings. So that means that unless this training is done in the evenings or on the weekend, the people who are in the classroom just simply can't attend. It's like the lovely literacy program that's being offered this summer. That's a wonderful free training and I wish I could send some teachers, but it's during the day. Maybe I can squeeze out one person, but I really think that my entire team should go, but I can't send eight teachers to a training that goes from nine to three on a Monday. It's just impossible.”

—*Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall participant*

Other Town Hall participants commented on the sheer volume of trainings that were required:

“...I just wanted to address, because you said every time the state requires new training for child care providers, I have no problem making sure that my staff take that training. The problem is where to take it, when to take it, and how much money is going to cost. For infants and toddlers you have to have the 90 hour and the 45 hour infant toddler certification. And then you have the health safety training and then you add the ADA training and the breastfeeding and the developmental screening, which is fine. I don't disagree that we need to provide quality professional development. My problem is I'm a 12-month program, we're open seven in the morning till six in the evening. When are my teachers going to take all this training, and who's going to pay for it? I pay for some of it, but I can't afford to pay for it for 26 staff.”

—*Baltimore County/Baltimore City Town Hall Participant*

Stakeholders also cited the need for staff to receive more training/coaching on how to work with children with different types of disabilities, trauma (more on this below), and cultural competency.

“As far as the trainings that teachers and providers are receiving for mental health or social emotional trainings, we know that the trainings only go so far, they really need that coaching, that practice-based coaching to continue those programs, to actually learn the skills and be able to provide “skills” in the classroom.”

—*Calvert, Charles and St. Mary's Counties Town Hall Participant*

Suggested topics for additional training included:

- Family engagement;
- Communication, cultural competencies, and relationship building;
- Supporting the needs of parents;
- Business practices;
- Equity; and
- Identifying developmental delays and disabilities.

Impact of MSDE Policies on the Sustainability of ECE Providers as Small Businesses

ECE providers across the Town Hall meetings spoke about the challenges of meeting the requirements of state programs while sustaining themselves as small businesses. Many shared how difficult it was to compete with the state Pre-K program, which often has an unintended effect of taking the older children (four-year-olds) from community-based programs, leaving these providers to primarily care for infants and toddlers, who are more costly to care for due to smaller group size and ratio requirements.

Another issue raised during the Town Halls was the inadequate levels of the child care scholarship compared with the costs of operating the program. Despite recent efforts by the state to increase the subsidy reimbursement rates for ECE providers, providers continue to feel that it does not adequately reflect the cost of providing quality child care, particularly when it comes to paying their staff. One participant noted:

“It is a money issue. It's...how do we create a sustainable business model, as simple as that. Because...we all agree that quality is really important. Maryland was a leader in safety standards many years ago and they have been leaders in increasing quality. But if it becomes unsustainable as a business model and we are asking more of our child care community in terms of their qualifications, but it's just if you can only have this many children in your program and the parents cannot pay...more than they're already paying. I just think that it's something that does need...public investment.”

—*Prince George's County Town Hall Participant*

The categorical eligibility associated with the Child Care Scholarship Program poses a challenge for providers who serve low-income families. Some providers talked about their experiences of not getting paid for the care they provided because a family's voucher was suddenly terminated due to a change in their work or living status. One Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall participant shared an example of a parent taking maternity leave and having her voucher terminated. She said,

“Because she was home, they terminated her vouchers. I allowed her children to continue coming because it was in the best interest of the children when the baby was getting ready to start at six weeks of age....So the person that's being hurt the most right now, because I didn't terminate care, it's my business.”

—*Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant*

Need for Bilingual Teachers

Participants talked about the growing population of English Language Learners in their programs. For example, one participant from the Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's and Talbot Counties Town Hall noted that:

"...when I began the Judy Center 19 years ago, we had 4% county wide children who were English as a Second Language children. Now, in my Pre-K, about 65% of those children are English as a Second Language."

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

Another participant spoke about how these children's experiences can impact their school readiness when they enter the school system at age four:

"And so these children are coming to public school for the very first time. Many of them without any outside experience in advance of that. Then, the numbers of children that we have with language deficiencies because of poverty and then the English language learners that we now have who don't receive services or unidentified as ELL until they get to kindergarten. [They do poorly] when it's time to take the KRA, which is only administered in English."

—Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties Town Hall Participant

Participants also discussed the need for additional training for early childhood staff on cultural competency or cultural immersion to help them be better able to serve the immigrant families who are seeking their services.

The Specific Needs of Family Child Care Providers

Family child care (FCC) providers, who offer care in their own home, were well represented in several Town Hall meetings, particularly in the Montgomery County and Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's and Talbot Counties. Several FCC providers spoke about their desire to be seen and respected as early childhood professionals and wanting to build trust and strengthen their partnership with MSDE. A few providers also brought up the need for those who make decisions at the state level that impact early childhood programs to have prior experience in the ECE environment in order to sufficiently understand the provider experience when making rules and regulations. Others spoke about how family child care providers can become part of the state's mixed delivery system:

"One of things about mixed delivery in the Kirwan Commission and more of that, I just wanted to share because it was really exciting last night we hosted family child care providers and they came throughout the state and we actually brainstormed how [they] could propose to be part of the mixed delivery because... that's where there are so many benefits to family child care also.... So just sharing that we are working on that."

—Prince George's County Town Hall Participant

The need for additional resources for FCC providers were also discussed across Town Hall meetings. Some participants spoke about the discrepancy between accreditation costs for center-based programs and family child care providers, with one Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's and Talbot Counties Town Hall participant saying:

"I mean, centers get free accreditation. F-R-E-E from MSDE. Family daycare has to pay close to \$900 for accreditation. Let's get real, family daycare providers don't make a whole lot of money. They look at what MSDE is doing, and it looks like you want centers to be accredited, not family [child care homes]."

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

Other family child care providers spoke about the high costs of purchasing curriculum and other materials:

“Curriculum is a big one, the only approved curriculum for family child care is now 1,500 dollars. The quality incentive grant only gives one thousand, so they can’t even, it doesn’t even cover that, so they need additional things, it’s not there...”

—Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties Town Hall Participant

Another child care provider made the important point that family child care providers are often not part of the state’s quality discussion even though they are filling an important gap in the supply of care, particularly odd-hour care:

“I want to invite us to think about irregular work hours. I think the opportunity that we have in Montgomery County is that when [MSDE] thinks about quality, [you] should think about what that means. I think because we sometimes the way you talk about quality, parents are more inclined to choose a center-based program or school-based program when family child care providers really often are the ones that are doing early mornings, evenings and weekends.”

—Montgomery County Town Hall Participant

Many participants expressed that the regulatory burden placed on FCC providers keep them busy with paperwork and that they would like the state to place more value on play-based learning and social emotional learning. Others discussed frustrations with meeting the ratio levels required of FCC providers, particularly when there is great demand for their services from the community. For example, in Maryland, FCC providers are allowed to care for up to eight children with no more than two under the age of two, and for a large FCC home, providers may care for between nine and 12 children with no more than two under the age of two. Some Town Hall participants mentioned the need for additional state resources to use for facility improvements to help FCC providers meet regulations.

Another issue that was raised by participants was the decline in the number of FCC providers across the state over the past decade. Many FCC providers use the revenue from four-year-olds, who are now going into free Pre-K programs, to help subsidize the cost of care for infants and toddlers. Without those older children, many providers are finding it too expensive to provide infant and toddler slots, causing some programs to close their doors and decreasing the overall supply of child care in some communities. Others talked about the implications of the state’s minimum wage increase and other state regulations on FCC providers who already struggle to compete with the wages of center-based programs. Participants noted:

“...in Wicomico County we lost 57% of our family child care providers in the last nine years. And a lot of the reason behind that is that the threes and fours are going into publicly funded programs. And so the family child care provider can’t stay in business because again, the numbers were limited [to two children] under two, and so the rest of our children have to be over two. Well, the [older] children are in free programs, we can’t compete with free. And so, they run out of business and then you lose infant and toddler spots.”

—Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties Town Hall Participant

“We can say for over 10 years that we [have been] creating a birth-to-age-two crisis... What’s happening in Wicomico County is that core of the city where the Title I schools are has literally had family child care providers wiped out and the majority of the infant and toddlers were in family child care. When you pull the four-year-olds away from them, they can’t afford to do the infants. Well, we can’t afford to live on that...”

—*Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties Town Hall Participant*

“We’ve got a mandate in the state of Maryland for \$15 an hour for employees. Yeah, and she can’t possibly do that without raising the rates of parents and all the parents started going to the underground system because I don’t believe that all of the people we’ve lost in the world of family daycare stopped doing daycare. They’re doing daycare and just not in the legal system and it’s going to be a huge issue. We’ve got large centers and not the tiny centers because they don’t have enough employees that would be affected by it....She’s going to have to raise the rates.”

—*Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant*

Many FCC providers discussed the lack of a support system for their programs along with insufficient connections with the school system. For example, providers mentioned it would be useful to have more kindergarten teachers connect with FCC providers to ensure consistency across programs and teaching styles.

“So, for my experience with working with the public school system, it was a no go. It was almost like...the family child care providers in the neighborhood were kind of like shunned because you’re just the babysitters, is kind of how they look at you.”

—*Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant*

“In California, they have family child care home education networks... There’s essentially a hub, could be a school district program. I was the director of the school district program, but we had 10 family child care programs that coordinated with us...that we administered as well. They didn’t have to do the paperwork, they didn’t have to take care of the funding. We did all of that. And then we also provided the professional development. So you’ve got a model.... it prevents the isolation and brings groups together. It provides...professional development that they can support each other with...”

—*Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant*

Town Hall participants also spoke about FCC providers’ challenges with marketing their programs to families and potential staff:

“Now you have Maryland EXCELS and yes you have Locate Child Care, but what about something via the pediatricians? What about something that advertises to let parents know if you’re looking for care here’s where you can go. This is an underlying problem for years... But that’s the biggest issue... I know it’s there, but parents, and I’ve had it said to me several times, they don’t know where to find it.”

—*Montgomery County Town Hall Participant*

Others discussed the need for business planning and other skills to help their programs thrive:

“...family child care providers, they are not business people, but family child care is definitely a business. So, we started talking to them about helping develop a business plan. The early childhood people would be working on content, but then the Chamber would be willing to partner and provide support to help develop the business plan and maintain that, because like I said that’s a huge part of it...”

—*Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

A few examples of effective training/coaching opportunities that were highlighted by family child care providers in Town Hall meetings included:

- Charles County Early Childhood Advisory Council/Department of Education offering a video for home-based providers to learn developmentally appropriate education strategies;
- Special Education Department using a Professional Learning Opportunity (PLO) grant to expand their training (coaching beyond school-based staff to Early Head Start and family child care staff in Caroline County); and
- Judy Center providing mentors and guidance to help family child care providers access accreditation and child care professional development funding.

“And when we did the ECAC for Charles County...all of our home providers said, what should we be teaching our kids and what should we not be teaching our kids? ...the Charles County Board of Ed got some wonderful kindergarten and Pre-K teachers together and they put on a video and a skit that was fabulous. It had all the answers that we needed. The providers came out to three different events and got to see for their own eyes. I don’t need to be teaching him how to add numbers. I need them to know what the number is and how to count.... And I think the information is not out there enough and that’s what we need to work on.”

—*Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant*

“I do want to apply because some of the family daycare providers with the Judy Center... [are] learning how to go after those child care professional development funds. I’ve had a couple of providers actually get the funds for an accreditation this year. And so, a more effective way because right now I’m using a mentor to mentor them who has also done the family daycare route versus the center route that I do.”

—*Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant*

“The three Judy Centers on Lower Shore have teamed up together with each other, across county lines, working through the resource center, and have taken 10 family child care providers through NAFCC accreditation. They are doing it by sharing their funds, sharing their resources, and the providers tap into the MSDE resources that will cover the cost of accreditation, will cover their training that is associated with that. The Resource center also wrote the community foundation grant to allow 25 providers to take toddler 1 & 2, for infant and toddlers to get their certifications, because for a family provider to go through accreditation, you have to have 124 clock hours within 3 years of applying, but trying to give that to you in chunks that are feasible.”

—*Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties Town Hall Participant*

Stakeholder Perspectives on Issues Affecting Access to Services that Strengthen, Engage, and Stabilize Families

An important goal of the PDG B-5 grant is to expand access to the “full range of services” that support the development, growth, and school readiness of children in Maryland. Therefore, when determining needs related to accessing services, it is important to understand not only the barriers to accessing high-quality ECE programs, but also barriers to accessing health, nutrition, wellness, and other programs and services that help to “strengthen, engage, and stabilize” families and their children.¹ This section summarizes the issues discussed by Town Hall participants that affect access to programs and services that support children and their families.

There are a number of different aspects to successfully accessing services. Families must be aware of services offered by the state, must feel comfortable accessing them, must be eligible, and must be able to successfully apply. Town Hall participants discussed a number of issues that affected their ability and/or willingness to access the services designed to support them. These issues included:

- Lack of awareness about the full range of support services that the state provides;
- Social stigma associated with accessing services and/or the fear of connecting with government programs;
- Bureaucratic and language/literacy barriers when attempting to access services;
- Low income-eligibility thresholds that make families in need of services ineligible; and
- Lack of system capacity to serve all those in need of services.

These issues are discussed in the sections below, along with a section that highlights the unique challenges associated with accessing services in rural communities.

Lack of Awareness as a Barrier to Accessing Services

A key theme running through the Town Hall meetings focused on ways to better inform parents about services that were available in the state. Participants noted that families simply were not aware of the range of services that the state provided and that this was an obvious and fundamental barrier to access. As one participant explained:

“I think another one of the problems is, obviously...a huge one, ...the lack of knowledge of ...resources. They are not aware of the amount of programs that are out there for them. So, I think we have to do a better job on that...”

—Montgomery County Town Hall Participant

Another participant in the Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s and Talbot Counties Town Hall highlighted better awareness of social service programs as a key need in the state, explaining “...[to] increase access and availability for the family... they [need to be] ... aware of what the resources are and know how to get [them].”

Town Hall participants across the state discussed the large number of children in Maryland who do not connect with the state’s early care and education system at all. This lack of connection was seen as an issue because early care and education programs are often a gateway to other services that children and families might need. As one participant noted:

“There are so many children who never enter into any of these systems. There are so many young parents who live at home with their parents, and so we’ve got grandparents who are watching these children and things have changed so much. And so there’s an entire population of children that are missed and opportunities that they never get exposed to.”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall participant

¹ US Department of Health and Human Services. (2018). *Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five* <https://ami.grantsolutions.gov/HHS-2018-ACF-OCC-TP-1379>

In addition to not accessing services that they might need, stakeholders discussed the implications of this lack of connection to the system on school readiness. As one participant noted:

“...when we were talking about what [the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment] is and what it assesses, none of my families knew that there were things their children were supposed to know before they came to school. So how are we getting that information out to them?”

—Prince George’s County Town Hall Participant

A key issue heard across multiple Town Halls was how best to support children who are not in an early care and education program before they enter kindergarten. Town Hall participants discussed libraries and pediatricians’ offices as two places to create awareness about different social service programs. As one participant noted:

“Libraries have actually become like grassroots community centers where people come in to use changing tables, plug their phones in outlets, or come in to eat. So finding really needy people who are not taking advantage of any of the already established programs, public libraries are becoming a default gathering place for people with absolutely no resources at all.”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

Town Hall participants suggested more social workers and funding for libraries to support this population. They discussed librarians as non-threatening sources of information that families may feel more comfortable accessing services through. One suggestion from the Town Halls involved providing additional training dollars to train librarians in how to help parents access services.

Town Hall participants also saw pediatricians’ offices as an underutilized resource for providing information to families. As one Town Hall participant suggested:

“One of the best things I think we could do is require every pediatrician to make parents aware. The one place they are definitely going is to the pediatrician. And they’re getting immunizations and making them aware.”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

Another participant from the Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall also suggested a stronger role for pediatricians: “There is an emphasis at the national level that pediatricians and OBs should be looking at social determinants of health, they should be screening children for Adverse Childhood Experiences.”

Another participant also agreed:

“I think pediatricians, not only should be checking their height and weight [but] should be saying, does your child participate in any social program...as in the child care program. You know, have they been to the library program?”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

A representative of the Maryland chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) discussed the issue of using pediatricians to connect parents to services and an innovative program created by the Maryland AAP. She noted that pediatricians do try to connect parents to services, however:

“Families come in for a visit, we throw a lot of information at them. We say, “This is what we think you should do next, here’s the information.” They come back six months later and they haven’t done anything because either they didn’t understand why it was important, they lost the piece of paper, they made a phone call and nobody called them back, et cetera....”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

She went on to explain a new program she was working on to support access to services:

“...We have been working with Parents’ Place of Maryland on training parent partners in the healthcare setting.... The parent partners are our parents from the community. In our program, they are parents with children with disabilities because that’s what we’re focused on. So [patients]...can talk to parents, parent to parent about, yes, my child was in early intervention and it was fine having these people come to my house and it really helped my child. Or talk to them about what barriers they have... So, they’ve been very helpful in increasing getting parents connected to the services that we’re recommending.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

Given the conversation across the Town Hall meetings, awareness was a large barrier to accessing services, and finding new ways to create more public awareness about important state services was a key area of concern for Maryland early childhood stakeholders.

Social Stigma and Fear of Government as Barriers to Accessing Services

Town Hall participants also discussed the impact of social stigma and fear of government as barriers to accessing services. Parents who suffer from drug addiction, who may be undocumented, who are victims of domestic violence, or have other issues they want to conceal from the state are less likely to reach out to find support for their children. More generally, there may be a stigma related to needing what can be perceived as a “hand-out” that keeps families from accessing services. For example, an MSDE representative discussed that the state changed the name of the child care voucher/subsidy program to a “child care scholarship” to reduce the stigma and increase the willingness of parents to access the program.

Town Hall participants discussed the perceived social stigma associated with receiving services, particularly those related to drug addiction and mental health. As one Town Hall participant noted:

“...A lot of our families are not admitting [to state agencies] that they have issues because that exposes them to criticism and screening from outside. So we have an increasing number of percentage of babies born addicted or exposed here in our county and as we track them and they’re not taking advantage of the services and the number of birth-to-five home visits is not increasing with the percentage increases. So we know we have children who are not being served.”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

Parents also feared that their children would be stigmatized for participation in services, specifically those for children with mental health issues and disabilities. As one Town Hall participant noted:

“There’s still the stigma associated with mental health issues and so I know often when the children are referred to our program, the parents say I don’t want my child labeled. There’s still that concern. So [we need to] change the mindset on mental health issues.”

—*Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant*

A second Town Hall participant concurred, discussing that the stigma can cause an adversarial relationship between the family and the service provider:

“And I think that that could be a piece of a policy level of how do we take away the stigma and the shame so that parents are not feeling like it’s their fault. There are so many causes of behavior and current parenting and environment is one piece. There’s neurological issues, there’s nutritional issues. We’ve got substance exposed babies...I sat down with a parent yesterday who feels like DSS [Department of Social Services] is the enemy. School is the enemy.”

—*Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant*

“And a lot of times parents are resistant and hesitant about diagnoses and labels and so on and so forth because they’ve had experiences with school systems, with bureaucracy, with agencies that tell them you aren’t doing the right thing. You aren’t enough... So they already come into engaging with agencies with that baggage from their own life experiences and school experiences. And like, here is another person attempting to tell me something is wrong with my child and I don’t see what they see.”

—*Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant*

Participants discussed how they have tried to reframe the conversation with parents about services, specifically around behavioral issues. As one Town Hall participant noted:

“There’s ... the stigma...What’s wrong with my kid? And it really isn’t. It’s just the kids do need sometimes a little extra support with their own ability to manage their feelings and their emotions.”

—*Montgomery County Town Hall Participant*

Fear also represented a major barrier to accessing services in at least two different ways. First, there was hesitation to accessing a range of services because of a misperception that single mothers would have to name the father. Town Hall participants noted that there was a fear in doing this because of retribution either through violence by the father or by stopping any informal support being provided. As one participant noted:

“A lot of families are not accessing mental health services, ...SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] and other benefits because they are under the impression that they have to name the father and have some kind of resistance to naming [him] and asking the father for the legal child support...[there may be] possible violence...or [the father saying] I’ll just stop paying then.”

—*Prince George’s County Town Hall Participant*

Another participant concurred:

“...We have some kind of resistance to naming the father and asking the father for the legal child support. We have a lot of families that refused to do that.”

—Prince George's County Town Hall Participant

A Maryland Department of Human Services representative attending one of the Town Hall meetings clarified that the only program that has a child support requirement is the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Yet, there was a lot of confusion about child support as a condition for eligibility for the child care scholarship program. As another participant explained:

“I called the 800 number for the child care scholarship program and under the frequently asked questions. You press a number and it says...: Yes, you do need to pursue child support. I talked to someone else who's told me about the “good cause” forms... It does seem like the good cause has to be that you are really feeling threatened or that something violent is going to happen to you...from the father of the child, which isn't the case with these young women.... They just want to work, they want to go to college. They don't want to involve the father of the child. So, I feel like there should be something in between, which isn't that they're being threatened physically, but that there's something that they don't want to involve the father.”

—Prince George's County Town Hall Participant

In addition to the child support issue, Town Hall participants also discussed fear within the immigrant community about accessing services. As one participant explained:

“[Immigrant] families are afraid to access any service, including public education. So we've seen a drop in SNAP. We've seen a drop in accessing health services, which has a direct impact on whether our children are getting immunizations and if they're getting the kinds of services they need just in general wellbeing. Because if you're trying to get another family member into the country, if you're trying to get yourself, in terms of moving from having a green card to citizenship, or asylum to green card to citizenship...there are some real fears.”

—Montgomery County Town Hall Participant

Another Montgomery County Town Hall participant explained that there are nonprofit organizations that are trying to “take the fear away” but a lot of immigrant parents do not want to fill out forms, explaining “...they're very afraid of applications...” The result is that it is difficult for social service organizations and providers to build relationships with immigrant families. One Town Hall participant from Montgomery County also noted, “Especially in this era right now with immigration fears, you know, to be able to build that relationship and support parents with infants [is difficult]...”

Stigma and fear are clear barriers experienced by families that may prevent them from accessing needed services.

Bureaucratic and Language/Literacy Barriers to Accessing Services

Town Hall participants discussed a host of barriers that pertained to their ability to physically access and apply for programs or services. These included transportation issues that prevented families from getting to the program or service, bureaucratic hurdles experienced during the application process, and language and literacy barriers.

Bureaucratic hurdles

With services for children and families spread across the Departments of Health, Human Services, Education, and other agencies, the Town Hall participants discussed how the system is complicated for families to navigate. Town Hall participants discussed that this fragmentation, and issues pertaining to the length and complexity of the application processes, make services more difficult to access.

Town Hall participants discussed that when working with families with significant needs, even simple application processes can be overwhelming:

“Many of our families have layer after layer after layer of problems and they get almost paralyzed not even knowing which direction to turn, and the system is difficult to navigate. Sometimes it’s as simple as filling out paperwork or knowing who to call, and so sometimes they don’t reach out because they’re just so overwhelmed.”

—*Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

Town Hall participants found the application processes of different programs difficult to navigate:

“There’s lots of confusing processes and sometimes our case managers...have a challenge helping the parents get through those processes and then there’s lots of hoops so go through...different kinds of IDs, and things that they need to have available. If they’re moving from home to home a lot of times they’re losing that [information]. So our case managers are working hard to find the birth certificates again to get them connected with the doctor... And now the process has gotten more difficult for I.D., so it’s a lot for our families to try to get through the different systems and sometimes the systems don’t work together.”

—*Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

“...many of our families are eager to gain access to those resources, but some of the documentation is lengthy, complicated. And I had a situation with my own mother...she was trying to fill out some of the paperwork...she entered a lot of questions incorrectly.... So this is somebody who’s lived here for almost 30 years and is having problems completing this information. A lot of our parents deal with the same problem to complete paperwork from the school system or any other agency because of the vocabulary that is used when asking the questions. It may not be something that they’re comfortable with or they may not even have the capacity to read or write. So it’s having someone to help them complete the form.”

—*Montgomery County Town Hall Participant*

Town Hall participants also spoke at length about how difficult it is to apply for Maryland’s child care subsidy/scholarship program. The participants discussed issues with the amount of paperwork, verifications, communication with state, applications being rejected, and delays with payments. In many cases, providers took on the role of becoming the liaison for the parents with the MSDE. Regarding the Maryland Child Care Scholarship, Town Hall participants noted:

“We’re sending the documentation over [for the parents],...had conference calls...[with MSDE] with parents sitting in the office and we’re on speaker to try to assist them with the questions that they’re asking the parents to help expedite the process, which is a service that we’re technically offering in addition to child care. And we make them aware that we can help them all the way through to the end because the parents get frustrated from start to finish and some of them never do finish.”

—*Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant*

“I don’t know what can be done about the voucher system, it has to be made easier for...these families because they don’t have the ability to scan, email, all of those things. We providers will do that...also as [parents] move, things happen with the vouchers. We have a lot of absenteeism because of that. So again, I don’t know what the answer is, but something needs to be done with that voucher system to make it much, much easier. 98 to 99% of my families are families on scholarship.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

“We have a family that has a high functioning college degree and they couldn’t figure out how to apply for the voucher system because it’s so burdensome.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

Town Hall participants had specific experiences and stories with parents struggling with the system. One participant discussed a father who appears to be in an endless cycle of trying to renew the subsidy:

“He’s been in the voucher system for years and this last time they kept asking for more and more information. It was more paystubs, more this, more that. He’s self-employed. ...the process took so long that his voucher was terminated.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

MSDE noted that the state had recently changed to year-long eligibility for child care subsidies which should reduce some of the administrative burden associated with the Child Care Scholarship Program.

One strand of the conversation involved the advantages and disadvantages of using technology to support the application process. Increasingly, the forms and processes associated with accessing services for children and families in Maryland rely on the use of technology. Maryland agencies are also relying on technology to make families aware of the services that are available and for the application process (i.e., submitting electronic forms). Town Hall participants talked at length about technological barriers to accessing services:

“So sometimes...even though we have technology and social media, ...I still like hard copy. Sometimes you’ve got to think about all the ways of communication, you know, TV, social media, hard mail, you know, just everything.”

—Prince George’s County Town Hall Participant

Town Hall participants discussed the importance of having a “human touch” to support families through the application process, particularly those families that have higher need:

“They need that one-on-one, face-to-face and when [the child care caseworkers] were pulled out of our county social services offices, the damage started and we really need to go back to we are human beings, we are not computers... we need to go back to, ‘Hi I’m Holly, how can I help you today?’ I’m doing that every day to my parents, that’s what our parents need and we really need to take a step back and say, hey people come first and this is what this is about. This is about people coming first.”

—Baltimore City /Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

Furthermore, immigrant families and grandparents who are raising children may not have access to technology to allow them to become aware of services or to fill out electronic forms. One Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall participant noted: “We have a lot of grandparents and great grandparents that have custody, so they still have flip phones and no text. They rarely have computer access at home. So that’s another group of people we have to consider.”

As a support for families, Town Hall participants discussed the importance of case management services. Case management helps families get through the system and connects them with the services that are needed. However, there is a perception among Town Hall participants, as noted in the quote above, that there are too few caseworkers available to support children and families. In some cases, caseworkers can only be assigned under certain conditions and those that need case management do not get connected to services. One Town Hall participant from Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties noted, “A mental health diagnosis is needed to receive these [case management] services, and families that need case management, don’t have these services. There needs to be more of these [case management] services available.”

Language and literacy

Another frequently discussed barrier to access involved language and literacy issues of the families most in need of the services. While efforts have been made to create awareness of services and application processes in other languages, these issues still pose significant barriers. One Town Hall participant included language as one of the top three barriers to accessing services:

“One of the challenges our families have is access to resources because either they don’t read or write in English, they don’t have transportation or they may not have child care if they need to go to an agency, which will require them to spend a few hours at that location. So transportation, child care and language.”

—Montgomery County Town Hall Participant

Another participant noted:

“...Underlying everything that’s come out in this Town Hall...is...a literacy issue. You have many families who speak a language but don’t read or write the language. so that’s one of our biggest concerns...”

—Prince George’s County Town Hall Participant

At least one participant discussed the ineffectiveness of state supports to help families who do not speak English:

“And I don’t know if any of you have used the language line...but as an English speaker using the language line, that’s very frustrating because it, it’s just chops up...the conversation. And when you are talking about your own suicidal thoughts, why you want to leave this world...to have to stop and wait and wonder if that person is saying it correctly or whatever. ...it was a very depressing situation to be in with this mom.”

—Prince George’s County Town Hall Participant

Specific access issues for rural communities

Maryland’s rural areas have demographic, economic, and social characteristics that are different from the state overall. Low population densities mean that health care, social, and educational services can be more difficult to access, especially if reliable transportation is unavailable. Town Hall participants discussed the unique struggles of accessing services in Maryland’s rural communities.

When asked about services, participants from rural areas discussed the dearth of services overall, and spoke specifically about the lack of medical and mental health services. With regard to medical services, the Town Hall participants explained:

“We don’t have enough doctors. And not just mental health or things along those lines. That’s just the dearth. That’s kind of like what we live with on a daily basis.”

—*Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant*

“So Caroline [County] does not have any hospital. The only landlocked county in the Eastern shore has no hospital. We have no pediatricians. We have no pediatric dentists. So when you’re talking about driving from Templeville, which is almost all the way in Queen Anne County to Easton, like to have a baby, sometimes it’s at the gas station.... So there are a lot of issues.”

—*Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant*

Town Hall participants also expressed a need for mental health services in rural communities.

“We have a rural community where services are just not readily available. I know even for us in higher ed, it’s an issue. You know I had a [client with a mental health] issue where I called and it was an answering machine. The message said, ‘if we don’t call you back in seven days, call us back.’ If you have a mental health crisis, you can’t wait seven days.”

—*Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant*

Participants also pointed out that rural communities are at a disadvantage when applying for Pre-K funding because of the perceived requirement to serve a minimum number of children. A participant explained that rural communities were not able to take advantage of the Pre-K expansion grant because of a two-classroom requirement:

“Then they come out with...Pre-K expansion...[only] if you have two classes of fours, of 20 each... Rural schools don’t have that. So nothing’s been addressed to keep the rural concepts. It’s only been focused for the major city...and you’re going to have a major child care crisis.....”

—*Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant*

Given these access issues for families in rural areas, it is important to target initiatives especially for this population.

Low Eligibility Thresholds as a Barrier to Accessing Services

Town Hall participants also discussed the income eligibility for specific programs, including the Child Care Scholarship Program, as a barrier to access. Participants noted the large number of families that could not afford high-quality care but had incomes that did not allow them to qualify for the program. One parent discussed her own situation:

“So it’s like we’re balancing the needs of our kid and...trying to get those services...that you guys are providing freely to some other groups. But we’re kind of stuck in that weird limbo of not being able to access some good, high-quality programs that are available because of the income barrier. And there’s a lot of programs that, unfortunately, parents like me fall in that middle income where we have to choose between, okay, can I do this out of my income, but I can’t get any help....”

—*Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant*

Another Town Hall participant expressed a similar concern:

“They make just too much money... So, our concern moving forward is alright, it’s great that we’re getting these children to full day Pre-K programs, which is excellent. But how are we going to assist the [other] parents because the limits on the state scholarship are really too low, not necessarily helping the... families that it could be helping. And there’s a lot of families that are at 300 percent, at 400 percent even, of the poverty level, they can barely afford a high-quality child care. With both parents working, let alone if they have two children...”

—*Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant*

It is also important to note that participants did acknowledge that the state is trying to address this issue. As one child care provider acknowledged:

“I would like to thank the state for raising the child care subsidy income eligibility level because what we’ve seen at our center is that’s helped families with lower incomes access higher quality programs. So, I’m happy to hear that those income levels are going to continue to go up because that will help with access.”

—*Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant*

Lack of Program Availability as a Barrier to Accessing Services

Town Hall participants discussed that even when other barriers to access have been overcome, the service might not be available. This issue was less of a concern for the Child Care Scholarship Program, but a number of other services had long wait times or were unavailable altogether. Overall, there was a perception among Town Hall participants that the state was cutting resources while demand increases. Participants discussed an inability to access a number of different services including:

- Infant and early childhood mental health;
- IDEA Part C and Part B, Section 619;
- State Pre-K program;
- Judy Centers;
- Home Visitation; and
- Child Care Resource & Referral.

Below are the quotes by Town Hall participants that discussed the lack of capacity in each of the programs to serve all of the children and families in need of them.

Infant and early childhood mental health consultants and services

“At our resource center, we provide early childhood mental health as well as technical assistance through the resource centers, and we are still bogged down... We have the highest numbers...we carry the highest caseloads for our resource center as well as our early childhood mental health programs. We have a 22 child wait list... We’re really bogged down. And I think that’s a huge barrier.”

—*Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant*

Capacity to serve children with disabilities

“A child has to be two years below grade level to qualify for services. When you’re talking about babies, it’s really hard to get the service. There’s a very high level of discrepancy before we even qualify for services. So maybe that’s something that needs to be reconsidered, and educating pediatricians who always disagree with us.”

—*Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant*

Pre-K capacity

“I don’t have enough Pre-K spots. Pre-K registration opens on a Monday and by Friday, I’m full... with a waitlist.”

—*Prince George’s County Town Hall Participant*

Judy Center capacity

“If you’re in a Judy Center, then within that school district, the majority of parents or at least someone they know knows to call a Judy Center. But, Judy Centers were cut this year. So you know, [funding] for services...are suddenly thousands of dollars less...that’s typically what we see. ...you find something awesome and instead of seeing it grow, stay around, [it gets cut]. ...people... move to a community so that they can be in a Judy Center. So they can figure out where to go and what to do.”

—*Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant*

Home visitation capacity

“If you could find additional money for home visiting in the state. Because of all my years of experience, home visiting has made the difference for families. That relationship, the feeling of knowing someone and then the same thing with the case management resources. Those people are very knowledgeable, our home visitors are very knowledgeable about what’s going on and they can be really pivotal in getting things back to where it should be in the early childhood space.”

—*Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

“One of the things I would like to see is more focus on home visiting.... it’s amazing....It’s all evidence based. We have to meet the highest standards. I’ve never been through anything like this in my life and my career’s almost over. I read the application from MSDE to HHS. Home visiting is noted as part of the early childhood system in our wonderful state. I appreciate that, but I think we need to focus more on doing this upfront work. And some people say, oh, home visiting it’s so expensive. So it might look like a lot up front, but it saves all that remediation costs.”

—*Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant*

Child Care Resource & Referral program capacity

“...And I specifically oversee the Child Care Resource and Referral Program. Extremely proud of the work that we’re doing helping programs with EXCELS, accreditation, credentialing, and continued education. ...we’re a team of 10. ... we have bilingual staff who help our providers. We’re trying to get out there as much as possible, but the reality is the Resource Referral Network...the funding is very limited to be able to do the good work that we’re doing. So I would say MSDE should consider looking at how that funding is appropriated to the jurisdictions. Montgomery County is one of the largest jurisdictions with about 1,400 registered or regulated child care programs. And the percentage of funding that we get is limited to do the work that want to do.”

—Montgomery County Town Hall Participant

Stakeholder Perspectives on Issues that Affect the Supply of and Access to High-Quality ECE Providers

In addition to discussing access to health, nutrition, wellness, and other social service programs, Town Hall participants discussed issues affecting the supply of ECE services and concerns with parents’ ability to access high-quality ECE providers. Issues brought up in earlier sections of this report, including eligibility thresholds for child care scholarships, stigma, awareness, and language barriers, could have also been included here. This section focuses on the remaining themes that emerged from the Town Hall meetings that focused on the supply of ECE settings and parents’ ability to access ECE. These themes included the:

- Lack of supply of infant and toddler care across the state;
- Need for more inclusive classrooms for children with disabilities;
- Potential impact of Maryland’s newly enacted minimum wage law; and
- Implications of perceived over-regulation on the supply of ECE.

Access to Infant and Toddler Care

The supply of infant and toddler care is of serious concern among parents and practitioners across Maryland. As discussed earlier, infant and toddler care is the most expensive form of care because of the low adult-to-child ratios for this group of children. It is difficult for parents to absorb these costs, so providers typically subsidize the cost of infant and toddler care within their programs with money made serving three- and four-year-old children, which have larger adult-to-child ratios. However, with the expansion of state-funded Pre-K, more four-year-olds are in school-based programs, straining providers and making infant and toddler care more expensive and difficult to find. As one Town Hall participant explained:

“...From the center or the family child care perspective, very often it’s your older children that are paying for the program to be able to afford you to give an affordable rate to the infants, if you didn’t have the older children, then that means the infant care would go up...”

—Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant

A second Town Hall participant noted:

“...There’s the zero-to-two piece. We hear that [from parents] all the time and our waiting list shows it because we serve eight weeks to four years. And so that’s always our longest wait list. And we hear parents all the time saying, we can’t find care, period. But then high-quality care...”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

Other participants agreed:

“...My son is 19 months old now, but getting care for that first few months was next to impossible in that area. There was nothing...that met my personal standards.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

“One of the issues is that a lot of places...there’s a high need for infant care... parents don’t realize they have to start calling very early, you know, when they first get pregnant...”

—Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant

ECE for Children with Developmental Delays and Disabilities

In addition to infant and toddler care, Town Hall participants discussed the difficulty with finding high-quality child care for children with disabilities and developmental delays. While participants discussed that Head Start programs are required to serve children with disabilities and developmental delays, families not eligible for Head Start have a very difficult time finding care. One Town Hall participant noted:

“...The families that we work with, whose kids have developmental delays and diagnosed disabilities can’t even get into the door to get those services or get that information. So, we did a report a few years ago now that found that 72% of the families couldn’t get child care in any area of the state if their child had a diagnosed developmental delay or disability...”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

Participants from other Town Halls had similar comments, such as:

“And as a parent of a child with a learning disability, I didn’t meet any of the income criteria for any of your wonderful programs. There is a huge gap for parents like me who are supporting their children but need access to high-quality programs that may not be able to afford it.”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Impact of Minimum Wage Law

Early in 2019, the Maryland General Assembly passed the Minimum Wage and Overtime Law, which will gradually increase the Maryland minimum wage for Maryland workers to \$15 per hour by 2025. While it is important that Maryland workers receive a living wage, numerous child care providers in the Town Hall meetings expressed concerns about the implications of the mandated wage increase for their employees. Child care providers noted that parents already struggle to pay the current rates for care and, in many cases, providers must find alternative funding sources to fill the gap between what parents can pay and the cost of providing care. The minimum wage increase will significantly increase the cost of doing business for child care providers, forcing them to raise rates that parents already cannot afford. This dynamic will have an effect on the supply of ECE and parents’ ability to access care. As one Town Hall participant noted:

“We are accredited, we have an EXCELS rating of five but in order for that to happen, and we do participate in the food program and we accept child care subsidies. But as the Executive Director of the nonprofit I have to raise about \$128,000 to cover the...gap... So, I am very concerned with these other child care providers [about the minimum wage increase]. At \$15 an hour, in the first year alone, I have to now add \$70-\$80,000 to my budget because I can’t just raise my lowest [salaried employees]. When you don’t pay your teachers that much money, you...have to raise everybody in proportion or you’re going to have a mass exodus....”

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

“I have folks in my center right now who make what will be under the minimum wage on January, 2020. That’s only six months, seven months away. And when I started to do my budget for next year, I realized I’m going to have a few problems because 90% of my budget is personnel. I am a nonprofit center, so I don’t have to pay for a lot of things that other centers pay for. But I still see this as a problem for child care that is private across the state.”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

“The increase in minimum wage is really going to affect...tuition prices and families and really snowball into something people aren’t expecting.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

“I’m concerned how many of my programs are going to close because now that cost at minimum wage is going to go to the parent and they’re already paying tuition like a private school for their children that are in care. Infant care, I can’t even begin to imagine what the price of that is now. I don’t even ask anymore.”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Over-Regulation of and Inadequate Support for Providers Causing an Expansion of Non-Licensed Child Care

Finally, Town Hall participants discussed the cost and administrative burden of all of the rules and regulations on ECE providers. Many providers in the Town Hall meetings felt that they were over-regulated and complained about the training requirements, ratios, and other regulations, in addition to the enactment of the minimum wage law discussed above. These regulations were perceived as excessively burdensome and created opportunity costs that took time away from their primary job of caring for children. As one Town Hall participant described:

“It is a lot of work and we, when we have to do all this work, it takes away from the time that we have to work with these children and it’s not fair to these children that MSDE keeps putting more regulations on us and requirements. It’s not fair. It’s expensive for us. We don’t have the time. We need to focus on the children and not paperwork and it’s, it’s upsetting.”

—Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant

According to some Town Hall participants, the implications of the perceived over-regulation is that it is pushing providers either to close their doors or to offer unregulated care.

“...Our child care providers have been given a lot more rules and regulations lately and in doing so you’ve actually pushed away some child care providers who couldn’t keep up.”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

“I know about three years ago, a lot of family centers started closing. It was like a mass exodus and part of that is the requirements the state is putting on, not just home providers, but the cost of me to train each employee is increasing. We keep adding on, adding on. Now we’re going to get all the teachers physicals...[and] we’re having to take the cost. Yet, we don’t have county money supplementing us, so there’s a lot of trainings that just keep being added...”

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

Some Town Hall participants discussed the disconnect between the burden of the regulations and the amount of support they are receiving from MSDE. There were numerous calls for more support:

“I think as far as family providers go, there’s a lot to start up. I know that Maryland has a \$500 grant and they have to buy the things first and then get reimbursed. But it’s a lot more than \$500 to start up a family provider with the trainings that we require.... They have to buy cots, do the fire marshal inspection and that costs money...If their well doesn’t pass, they have to buy a new well for a \$1000 or \$2,000. Family care costs a lot of money. So, if there is a grant that’s more than \$500, that would be helpful and encouraging for people to start off.”

—*Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant*

“And I’m wondering why MSDE is not having their public schools inform parents of what licensed child care looks like and what unlicensed child care looks like because we’re looking at the minimum wage increases. We’re looking at this Family Leave Act, we’re looking at things that are going to jump up our child care costs and the obligation of staying open. So I’m really curious as to how MSDE is going to, and the public school system is going to support us because that’s not happening.”

—*Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant*

Stakeholder Perspectives on Initiatives to Improve the Quality of ECE programs and Providers

Improving the quality of ECE settings is an important function of a B-5 Early Childhood State System. Accordingly, understanding the issues that impact ECE quality was an important topic of conversation during the Town Hall meetings. While some Town Hall participants may have questioned the extent to which parents overall understood and valued ECE quality, it was an important area of concern for the stakeholders participating in the meetings. Town Hall participants discussed the importance of the early years for future learning and success and the role that quality ECE settings play in brain development and promoting school readiness. One participant from the Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall summarized the importance of ECE quality by noting, “By five we have the brain that we will use for the rest of our lives.”

Numerous aspects of ECE provider quality were discussed, including:

- How quality is defined and measured in Maryland;
- The complexity of Maryland’s initiatives designed to acknowledge and improve quality, which include Maryland EXCELS, Maryland Accreditation, and the Maryland Child Care Credentialing Program;
- The lack of public awareness about Maryland EXCELS, Maryland Accreditation, and the Maryland Child Care Credentialing Program; and
- Issues with the ECE workforce and the impact of these issues on quality.

Each of these topics is discussed in detail below.

Defining and Measuring Quality

Town Hall participants discussed the key characteristics of ECE provider quality. By far, the most important aspect of quality discussed across the Town Hall meetings was highly trained, well-compensated early childhood educators who could engage and interact with children in ways that promote positive child outcomes and school readiness. The challenges related to this critical aspect of quality are discussed in detail in the section below. Other aspects of provider quality that were important to Town Hall participants included meeting the needs of working families by offering care for the hours that parents work; being play-based and developmentally appropriate; successfully engaging families and understanding family needs; and the ability to support social-emotional development and address issues related to infant and early childhood mental health.

Measuring the aspects of quality that matter most was a topic of conversation across several Town Hall meetings. At the center of this conversation was Maryland EXCELS—the state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System—which is the primary way in which the state measures, incentivizes, and improves the quality of ECE settings in the state. While state ECE quality measurement systems should measure the most important aspects of quality and distinguish among programs of different quality, Town Hall participants spoke about how Maryland EXCELS ratings do not always provide an accurate picture of ECE settings in Maryland.

While most of the dimensions of quality that Town Hall participants discussed (e.g., teacher quality, interactions, family engagement, etc.) are included in Maryland EXCELS, participants offered a number of reasons why they believed the system did not always offer an accurate rating of ECE providers. One reason for the inaccurate rating is the shortage of raters. This shortage meant that programs must wait for long periods of time to receive an updated rating even though their quality had significantly improved. In particular, there is a shortage of raters that speak Spanish and other languages, and accordingly, language poses a significant barrier to providers when trying to understand the policies and procedures of Maryland EXCELS. As one Town Hall participant noted:

“...There needs to be more monitoring and more [raters] going out to programs... that’s not happening right now because [name] is one person. She has all of Harford and Cecil County. There is no way she can do that. And...we know that...this is a problem. We also know that we...want more quality assurance specialists. We’re just trying to figure out ways to get that.”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Another common reason for an inaccurate measure is that providers do not see the value of getting re-rated to obtain a higher rating. Once providers are in the Maryland EXCELS system and have the rating necessary to participate in the state child care scholarship program, many do not see the benefit in being evaluated again for a higher rating. As one participant noted:

“...I noticed a couple of them were at level two, and I’m like there’s no way you’re a level two because I’ve been credentialed for almost 11 years... you can make so much more money by literally just taking a couple more classes or you know, turning this [form] in.... And so I had [the EXCELS rater] come out and sure enough, she went up two levels...”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Finally, Town Hall participants discussed that Maryland EXCELS’ focus on accreditation also makes obtaining higher ratings difficult. For example, in order for a center to achieve a level five on Maryland EXCELS, the center must have an “accreditation awarded by an organization recognized by MSDE...” In order for a center to be accredited by the state of Maryland, lead early childhood educators in the center must have at least an associate degree. In many cases, this requirement precludes a center from obtaining a level five even though they are providing high-quality care. As one participant from the Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall noted, “it is impossible to get teachers to go back to school to get their degree because who wants to work for nothing? Why would you go to school...if you’re not going to get paid a living wage?” A Town Hall participant from the Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall noted, “We have staff in our program who have been there for 20 years. They are not going to go back to school and get degrees. Their life does not allow that. They are not online learners. It’s not going to happen.”

Participants from the Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall and Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall meetings also discussed the need for an alternative to accreditation in Maryland EXCELS:

“And we struggle every time with EXCELS and every time with accreditation because our staff don’t meet all of those levels. They’re talented, they’re skilled, and they’re hard workers. I want them to stay here doing great work and we’ll take the time and time again and struggle, struggle, struggle to hit our goals. But I do wish there was a way to look at alternative pathways to prove their work.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

“It’s also the biggest dilemma or challenge we have for the higher levels of EXCELS because those require accreditation which requires a degree within two years...”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

Other feedback on Maryland EXCELS included the lack of birth-to-age three standards and the fact that licensing and EXCELS try to make every program “cookie cutter” with a monitoring and measurement system that doesn’t do enough to respect and highlight program differences. One participant noted:

“When we’re talking about the brainpower of birth to three, our quality rating systems don’t have any specific standards for infants and toddlers. So just something to really think about there and how do we really support that quality, especially for infants and toddlers.”

—Baltimore County/Baltimore City Town Hall Participant

Confusion About Maryland’s Quality Initiatives

In addition to issues with measuring quality, the Town Hall participants discussed the complexity and confusion surrounding Maryland’s initiatives that acknowledge and improve quality. The discussion centered around three initiatives, all seeking to acknowledge and incentivize ECE providers who go beyond basic licensing standards:

- Maryland EXCELS, the state’s QRIS discussed above;
- Maryland Child Care Credential, a voluntary program which includes six provider credential levels and four administrator levels; and
- Maryland Accreditation, a process in which programs commit to continuous quality improvement, which includes program administration, program operation, and community and home partnerships.

Some Town Hall participants saw these initiatives as “duplicating” quality improvement efforts in the state. Other participants discussed confusion in the provider community created by these three different efforts to acknowledge and incentivize quality:

“And there seems to be a significant amount of confusion on what Maryland EXCELS is, what credentialing is, what accreditation is, what they’re supposed to be doing... We find that a lot of people think that accreditation, EXCELS, and credentialing are all the exact same program. And they’ll be enrolled in one program and think that they’re enrolled in another. And then we get a lot of questions where I’m enrolled in this program but I’m not getting the benefits, what’s going on?’ ...but trying to figure out how to provide more clarity on all of these programs and opportunities for providers because it seems there is a lot of confusion from the ones that we’ve worked with.”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

“But they all really are giving their heart to this and yet it becomes a very complicated web because there is credentialing, there is accreditation, there is all those things. And in my center, we struggled really hard to stay on top of all those things.”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

“...One of the things that we hear from our child care providers that’s frustrating is that they have to go through EXCELS and accreditation and it seems like there’s two things that are very similar but yet they apparently are different enough that they have to do two things which is a lot of work...”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

Lack of Public Awareness about Maryland EXCELS, Accreditation, and Credentialing

One role of Maryland EXCELS, Maryland Accreditation, and the Maryland Child Care Credentialing Program is to provide information to parents about the quality of care when searching for an ECE arrangement. These quality initiatives are also important to providers because they help them market their programs to parents and help parents understand why they should pay a higher price for their care. While this may be true in theory, Town Hall participants discussed a lack of public awareness about these initiatives that minimized their impact on parental decision-making when choosing care. Participants discussed the need for greater public awareness across all of these initiatives and the fact that this lack of awareness does not make provider participation in the initiatives worthwhile. For example, one participant noted:

“I mean the extra steps, extra classes that we take, [parents] need to be educated on. I have a sign in my yard, nobody asks about the Maryland EXCELS. Nobody asks about credentialing. Nobody asks about being accredited. Any of those things. There should be a way that the information gets out there to the parents, and then we, who [are] taking the time and worn out getting all this extra education...we should be compensated in some kind of way for us constantly taking steps to improve.”

—Baltimore County/Baltimore City Town Hall Participant

Participants in Cecil and Harford Counties agreed:

“...Also want to say that I truly believe that, you know, Maryland EXCELS is our quality rating and improvement system. And I believe that we need to have a campaign, a marketing campaign that is directly reflected to parents about what quality is and what quality looks like so that they understand and it’s more widespread. I think that we’ve reached the provider community very, very well, but I don’t think we have reached the parents as well as we have the provider community...”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Early Childhood Workforce Issues

The knowledge and competencies of Maryland’s early childhood workforce was perhaps the most discussed topic across the Town Hall meetings. Town Hall participants highlighted the fact that highly trained early childhood educators are the most important aspect of quality in an early childhood setting, but finding qualified early childhood educators is by far the area of greatest need within Maryland’s B-5 Early Childhood State System. Town Hall participants identified three issues regarding the state’s early childhood workforce and its impact on quality. These were:

- A lack of respect for the early childhood profession, most clearly manifested in the poor compensation and benefits;
- Inadequate pre-service preparation both in terms of capacity to train enough educators and the appropriate coursework to prepare them for the classroom; and
- Lack of a coordinated in-service professional development system and the need for specific trainings to support teachers in the classroom.

No respect for the profession/absence of a career path/poor compensation

Despite the important role that high-quality early childhood educators play in the lives of children, families, and Maryland communities, those who work in the early childhood field are often not respected or recognized as professionals and are poorly compensated for their work. Town Hall participants discussed these issues at length, as well as the implications for recruiting and retaining effective early childhood educators for their programs. Participants consistently brought up the lack of respect for the profession. As one participant noted:

“...We do have a lot of expectations for child care providers, the quality and the education that they’re expected to bring with them. And...it doesn’t seem like there’s a lot of respect for their profession. Even though you shape and mold [a child’s] entire life.”

—*Baltimore County/Baltimore City Town Hall Participant*

Town Hall participants who were early childhood educators were looking for the same respect from the state and parents as they had for themselves. As one provider expressed, “I’m a champion. And I feel that we don’t get the respect we should get, and I feel like MSDE should be a partner with us, not be our regulator... And it is a big thing to me.”

Participants also discussed that certain segments of the early care and education workforce were more respected than others. Specifically, early childhood educators working in the public schools with the Maryland Pre-K program seemed to receive more respect than early childhood educators in child care programs in the community. As one Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall participant noted, “We are kind of the, please I hope I don’t offend anybody, we’re like the ugly step children within MSDE. And it’s hurtful because we work really, really hard.” Similarly, when discussing training, one participant from the Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall noted, “We’re asking them to take away time from their families and we’re not getting the...respect, [or] the same platform that we get in the public school teachers.” This was also expressed in the Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties Town Hall where one participant said that, “Respecting those of us in the child care area and knowing that we know what we’re talking about and stop looking down on us” was the most important issue to her.

For Town Hall participants, the clearest measure of a lack of respect for the profession was the poor compensation and benefits. Town Hall participants noted that in many cases, providers are making near poverty wages. As a participant from the Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall noted, “...It’s a very thin line between what the staff make, you know, and being eligible for those same services themselves.” Given how hard they work, providers in the Town Hall meetings couldn’t understand why there was not more value placed on the work that they do. As one participant noted from the Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties Town Hall, “We’re expecting these teachers to build the birth-to-five [continuum] but then they can go to McDonald’s and make more money [than] they can as a teacher. Yeah...it doesn’t make sense.”

Another participant noted:

“Four-year institutions wouldn’t take any of my credits and wanting me to go back and start over. At 48 years old, I was not going to do that. I obtained their degree from online, from an out-of-state institution, but I’m now paying \$200 a month in student loans and I make less than \$20,000 a year.”

—*Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties Town Hall Participant*

These respect and compensation issues have significant implications for Maryland’s B-5 ECE system, particularly in the ability to recruit and retain qualified early childhood educators. Several program directors shared experiences of having high-quality staff leave their programs for better-paying jobs and paid benefits in the public school system or other fields. In many cases, early care and education was considered by the teacher as a “side job” as they worked to obtain a better paying job or degree. As one center director noted:

“...In four years I’ve graduated three nurses from my ...center that I adore, and one of them at least had said, if you could just pay me what I’ll make as a nurse, I would stay here because she adored working with the kids. She loved our center, you know.”

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

Another center director from the same Town Hall followed:

“And young people that are going into child care...they may start out with thinking that it is a career, but there’s no incentive for them.... They’re not getting salary increases, they’re not getting bonuses. Then you know, what they started out with is pretty much [what] they [are] guarantee[d] to make, regardless of the level of education.”

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

Workforce recruitment and retention issues were heard across virtually all of the Town Hall meetings:

“...One of the hardest things for me is motivating my teachers to come back and to do it again because they feel that people don’t understand what they go through.”

—Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant

“...Because we focused on getting certification from Pre-K to third...we ... lose the educators to the public school system because they’re getting paid more. So I would like more funding for universities so they can creatively put proposals to create not only certifications to work in the public schools, but non-certification tracks that can also attract more or support the workforce of early childhood.”

—Montgomery County Town Hall Participant

Perhaps the most telling statement regarding this issue came from a young early childhood educator who explained:

“So I think while I absolutely love what I do, it’s just that the amount of money, like when the minimum wage goes up, I’ll get a raise. So that’s great. But you know, it’s just not sustainable...to make it a profession for me at least.”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Center directors wished they could pay more, but couldn't because parents can only pay a certain amount for care. As directors in the Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's Counties Town Hall explained:

“And so, the other thing you've got to also understand is if you are only able to pay a certain amount because the market only bears so much to charge the parents, then that staff is not going to be the staff that stays with you. It's constantly the staff that's going to college to get a different degree to go into a different field.... They're good with the children, but you know, you're going to lose them in about two years. Or if they don't have enough money to quite finish school, it might take them four years at Chesapeake because they're doing it part time.”

—*Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's Counties Town Hall Participant*

“So what it comes down to is when you guys want us to have this curriculum, want us to go to college. Yes, I went through the professional development grant and I got my degree. It helps, but we also have to increase our rates, which in turn causes parents to not afford us. Child care is the number one expense. The number one expense. Parents cannot afford it.”

—*Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's Counties Town Hall Participant*

Issue with pre-service preparation

Town Hall participants discussed the pre-service preparation of early childhood educators. Participants discussed the strong partnerships and programs that have been developed across Maryland's higher education system with colleges that included Allegany College, Chesapeake College, Montgomery College, Towson, Johns Hopkins, the University of Maryland and other institutions of higher education. Some participants spoke highly of how their college programs are preparing them to be early childhood educators. One participant noted:

“[After] finishing up my first year of college this year... I've cut back on a lot of the worksheets and things to send home. And...one parent just blindsided me one day and she was like, well, we need that stuff. And I'm like, but it's not age appropriate. I'm learning this now.”

—*Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant*

However, a number of needs and issues came up during the discussion on pre-service preparation. Most notably, the center directors raised the issue that many early childhood educators who successfully obtain a degree fail to demonstrate core competencies necessary to support children in the classroom. As one Town Hall participant from the Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties meeting noted, “...And I don't think the young teachers coming out of college have any clue what the children are like and I'm talking totally destroyed classrooms with an energy that is unbelievable for a four-year-old.”

Another participant noted:

“When I am trying to hire teachers, even with associate degrees, I think it is really important that they get more coursework that required them to do observation hours and work within a classroom. They cannot even control a classroom coming out with an AA or a bachelor's degree. It is a nightmare. They can't write lesson plans.... I asked the teacher about last week. She couldn't tell me what one of them was. Come on, you have an associate degree. We are really, really failing in higher education in trying to get teachers for early childhood.”

—*Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

In addition to the overall issues with preparing providers for the classroom experience, participants noted the lack of preparation for caring for children under the age of three and children with disabilities:

“I hope that we are concentrating at higher ed and in some of our other agencies to turn this... our early childhood educators to really focus on birth to two and prenatal to two, to really be able to get these kids off the ground as soon as we can, when we’re leaving some of our workforce behind...”

—*Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

“So someone has to train our teachers, whether it happens in the college, and maybe we can work something out with colleges where it’s part of their curriculum built in. Because I didn’t learn that when I went to college. I didn’t learn anything about special needs. And here I am working with special needs populations. It has to be integrated when they’re first getting their degrees.”

—*Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant*

Another issue that came up in the Town Hall meetings related to higher education was the fact that the higher education model is not designed for Maryland early childhood educators. As one Town Hall participant noted:

“[Students] can’t just go to college and do nothing else... These students also have to have a career at the same time or some job to be able to maintain their car insurance and their car payments, all that stuff. So in doing that, they can’t...stop working in the job that pays their bills in order to get their teaching degree.”

—*Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant*

In addition to these issues, participants noted the lack of capacity to meet the need for degreed early childhood educators in the state. As one member of the higher education community noted:

“And to speak to it from a higher ed perspective. There aren’t enough people to go around. Our graduates in our department have multiple offers before they even graduate. So early childhood degree folks are getting, you know, two, three or more offers when they haven’t even finished school. And here we are in the field trying to find these people. There’s a gap.”

—*Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant*

Lack of understanding of trauma-informed practices

While Town Hall participants discussed the need for additional training in numerous areas, the need for training in trauma-informed practices was mentioned extensively. Several Town Hall discussions focused on the significant increase in behavior problems and the number of children experiencing trauma being seen across early childhood settings, and its connection to the opioid crisis. Participants also talked about the lack of understanding around trauma and trauma-informed practices for both families and early childhood staff. One participant noted, “Many [families] don’t understand the behaviors that children are exhibiting and therefore they don’t know how to support it.” Participants stressed the need to build the capacity of educators around trauma-informed care so that they can feel equipped to handle these issues in the classroom. Typically, these trainings are limited to program administrators or directors of early childhood programs,

and many recommended that these trainings be open to those staff who spend the majority of time with young children on a daily basis to ensure that they are also adequately trained on this topic. Town Hall participants also emphasized the need for training on behavioral challenges and trauma-informed care for family child care providers:

“Adults who are hands on with the kids are the least informed about trauma-informed practices. And, we continue to train at the top and yet, that information is not trickling down in the way where the children are actually benefiting from that.... We want them to be ready for school academically. And, but none of that can happen without these trauma-informed practices. And so then we just see the great need for stronger partnerships with mental health organizations, and figuring out how to make that easier for the school systems because it's a constant battle to get those services within the school. And once we don't build that foundation with our early child care, it's that effect as they get older is just becoming more and more difficult to address.”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

“I've been open for 15 years and 15 years ago I didn't see as much parental stress as I see now. I don't know why that is, but we have a lot of parental stress. I've also had to do more CPS complaints than I ever have before for worrying about children and trauma, including, you know, some incidents where we do believe that parents have been under the influence and possibly opioid use. I also think that opioid use and drug use are impacting children's executive functioning, which is why we are seeing the rise in challenging behaviors. So that's another, you know, issue.”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

Stakeholder Perspectives on Early Childhood/Public School Connections and Transitions

When children make the transition from early childhood programs to elementary schools, most often they experience a different setting, teacher, and learning culture. Depending on the relationship between ECE providers and schools, and the processes they have in place, the transition can be seamless or stressful to children and their parents. Bridging the early childhood and public school systems by establishing relationships across settings and engaging in activities that promote continuity helps children and families manage this change, develop positive attitudes toward school, and build on the progress made in early childhood programs. Coordination can also facilitate data sharing between early childhood programs and Pre-K or Kindergarten teachers to help them better understand areas of need and potential areas of focus for incoming students.

Some federal programs require a formal agreement to support coordination—for example, Head Start programs are expected to enter into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the local agency that manages the publicly funded preschool programs in the program's service area.² However, many communities rely on state and local efforts to facilitate connections between early childhood settings and the public school system. Maryland's Judy Centers are a model for ECE program/school coordination, providing “transition strategies and activities for children and families across all programs, including Pre-K, Kindergarten, Head Start and child care, as well as children entering formal programs for the first time.”³

Town Hall participants discussed the transition from ECE programs into the public school system and the overall connection between schools and early childhood programs. The discussion focused on three themes:

- The overall lack of connection between ECE providers and schools and sources of tension between ECE providers and schools;
- Specific issues regarding the ability to obtain an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a preschool child through the schools; and
- Suggestions for the state to better support ECE/school coordination and transitions.

²Head Start Policy and Regulations. 1302.53 Community partnerships and coordination with other early childhood and education programs. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-53-community-partnerships-coordination-other-early-childhood-education>

³2018 Judy Center Annual Report

Overall Lack of Connection between Schools and Early Childhood Programs

Town Hall participants noted that there was great variation in the relationship between early childhood programs and schools by locality and even by school. As one participant noted, “transition is only as good as the local principals,” meaning that it was the relationship with and willingness of the principal that makes all the difference in these transitions. However, in general, participants did not feel that there was a strong connection between ECE programs and schools across the state, and in some cases, the relationship could be described as somewhat adversarial.

From the perspective of ECE providers, the competition for children, funding and pay inequities, and different pedagogical approaches were discussed as sources of tension between the providers and schools. With regard to competition for children, one provider noted:

“Well [the schools]... almost put me out of business. You know. Public schools have taken it. At first, they...started taking the fives, we had fives when we started. Then they chose the fours. Now they want to take the threes, that’s going to leave us with twos and infants. Yeah. And the staff ratio, that is so high that we can’t afford it. I cannot continue.”

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

Similarly, another provider noted:

“I think that one of the bigger impediments is the trust issue and the fact that we’re perceived to be at cross-purposes in terms of you’ve got for-profit centers that are just trying to make a living. You’ve got public school and you got Head Start and there seems to be this perceived competition to take kids...”

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

Another issue causing tension was the different pedagogical approaches used by ECE providers and schools, particularly regarding expectations for children and around developmentally appropriate practice. As one provider explained:

“I think the expectations that public school is putting our child care providers is not... reasonable... Developmentally appropriate practices are just that—they’re developmentally appropriate... There’s different ways to teach letters, numbers, colors... So just because we’re not teaching it to what I think some public schools deem as the right way to be teaching it or what they should know when they come in... [It is] something that we really need to talk about too between early childhood programs and public schools because I think that if we built those transitions effectively, I think that the child care providers could benefit and the public schools can benefit too. But right now it seems like... there’s been a divide in these two systems. [We]...need to be talking to each other and [have] much, much more... respect for what each brings to the table. And I think if we can work on doing that, that that’s when we’re going to see children succeeding more...”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Other providers discussed the desire and efforts to “push up” developmentally appropriate practice into the school system. As a provider from the Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall noted, “We’ve worked really, really hard over the last couple of years to not be pushed down upon with the expectations, but to start to push up what is developmentally appropriate of growth mindset.”

Finally, one provider noted that if the state showed more respect to the provider community, that would help in achieving more respect from the schools:

“I think that the issue becomes how the state recognizes providers like us.... And unless we are looked at as kind of a peer of the school, as a principal. We don’t get the level of coordination I guess what we’re looking for. If the state were to give us sort of a level [of respect] that we could reach where we would be recognized by the school as a partner.”

—*Montgomery County Town Hall Participant*

There were also participants that highlighted transition success stories:

“I just want to say here in Calvert County. We have a really good transition to school program...There’s a person at the Board of Education who sends a letter to the child care center and says, you can go during this week. You contact your schools that you’re servicing and make that connection. And we do set it up. And then we go in and the children get to go in and spend an hour in the classroom with the teacher. So we get to talk to the teachers about what they’re doing. We get to actually see it, and they do a project and get to see the playground and all that.”

—*Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s Counties Town Hall Participant*

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Process

Communication and information sharing between early intervention programs and the school system is critical to ensuring that public school teachers are prepared to handle the unique needs of young children with disabilities and developmental delays after they transition into the school. For families who are enrolled in the Maryland Infants and Toddlers Program when their child turns three, their Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) team will help them develop a transition plan to work with the preschool program to determine if their child is eligible for preschool special education. Families with children who are considered eligible can either begin receiving preschool special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) at age three or continue early intervention services through an extended IFSP until the beginning of the school year following their child’s fourth birthday.

During the Town Halls, Head Start programs discussed the IEP process as a coordination issue with schools. For Head Start programs, federal law requires that 10 percent of currently enrolled children be children with disabilities. To obtain an IEP, the Head Start program must work with the local school district in the IEP process. Head Start programs perceived that the process took too long, losing valuable time to support the child. A Head Start provider from Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall noted: “It’s always we have 30 days to do this, we have 30 days to do that... Or... because [the child doesn’t]... meet all the criteria, we’re going to wait more and see [if there is a]... developmental delay... This is too much.”

Town Hall participants spoke about a similar lack of connection between child care programs and schools, placing the burden of forming connections largely on the family’s capacity to advocate for their child. One participant from Montgomery County Town Hall said there is “no connection whatsoever with child care unless a parent advocates for the child care provider to be at IEP, 504 meetings, things like that.” Others cited issues with data sharing that stem from the confidential nature of IEP data and student privacy. Many child care providers who are not located at a school-based setting may not be aware of the rules around information sharing or may not be involved in a child’s IEP meeting unless a parent or caregiver requests their participation. As a result, there is no formal process for information on the child’s development prior to school entry to be strategically shared with educators in the public school system.

“As a Pre-K teacher, I’ve had students come in my classroom day one that are nonverbal. Don’t know how to play, don’t how to follow a direction, running around my classroom. And I wonder where has this child been and why hasn’t someone in the community been aware of this child’s trauma and this child’s need? So along with [name] too, with coordinating services, as an educator, that’s horrifying to me that this child has somehow had shots, has seen the doctor, is out, you know, getting services, but someone hasn’t noticed this child is in significant need.”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Transition Activities across the State

Town Hall participants discussed the different activities they were doing to support the transition between early childhood programs and schools. These included transition packets for Pre-K students, meetings between child care, Pre-K, and kindergarten teachers, resource fairs, visits to the schools, and other events, like principal luncheons organized by Head Start programs. Participants praised the Judy Centers and mentioned some past efforts coordinated by MSDE to facilitate the transition from ECE providers to schools. However, Town Hall participants thought MSDE could do more to support collaboration between schools, early childhood providers, and community partners. In addition to tracking prior care experiences through the data system, the state could create a formal system for communication between early learning programs and the school system to ensure that the information shared is both appropriate to share and useful to teachers. The state can also provide transition planning tools and resources to all Maryland schools to help them reach out to providers and offer supports that focus on creating connections between teachers, children, and families. Resources from MSDE could potentially highlight classroom swap visits, professional learning community meetings, kindergarten visits for children, and Parent Cafés. Key connections across the ECE and public school systems included:

- *Connecting Teachers:* Through classroom swap visits and professional learning community meetings, teachers (and administrators) learn about similarities and differences in ECE and kindergarten settings and work together to develop strategies to support continuity for children and families.
- *Connecting Children:* By experiencing kindergarten visits and establishing connections with kindergarten students, children in ECE settings can learn more about what kindergarten is like, become familiar with the elementary school setting, and connect with older peers.
- *Connecting Families:* Parents of young children served by ECE settings can gain insights into the kindergarten experience and have their questions answered by connecting with kindergarten teachers and parents of current kindergarteners in Parent Cafés. Key connections across the ECE and public school systems included:

Stakeholder Perspectives on Collaboration and Coordination of Programs and Services to Support Vulnerable Families

The ultimate goal of Maryland’s PDG B-5 grant is to find ways to coordinate and align existing early childhood programs, resources, and services. A large portion of funding to support children and families in Maryland derives from numerous different federal programs including Head Start; the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF); Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program; TANF; the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP); and numerous others. When the state programs to support children and families are added to these federal programs, the result is a complicated mix of programs and services with different eligibility levels, program requirements, and application processes. Indeed, in the presentations offered by the state agencies at the beginning of each Town Hall, no less than 15 different programs were highlighted.⁴

⁴Some of these programs included Head Start; the Child Care Scholarship Program; the Child and Adult Care Food Program; Infant and Toddler Special Education Program; Early Childhood Special Education; Maryland State Pre-Kindergarten; the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Program; Medicaid; Maryland Children’s Health Insurance Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; Maryland Early Assistance Programs; Child Support; Foster Care; Behavioral Health; and others.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the discussions within the Town Hall meetings described the difficulty providers and families face in navigating the requirements across programs and that some programs seemed to work at cross-purposes. Key themes from the Town Hall discussions that related to collaboration and coordination included:

- MSDE taking a stronger role in coordinating Maryland’s Pre-K program so that different sectors of the ECE system are not competing for children;
- The need to think about the coordination of program services from the client perspective;
- Providing more case management services and system “navigators” to support families in accessing services across the fragmented system;
- Expanding the Judy Centers, which is seen by stakeholders as a successful state model for coordinating programs and connecting families to programs and services; and
- Using technology and data effectively to inform and coordinate programs and services.

Stronger MSDE Role in Program Coordination

The most troubling coordination issue for Town Hall meeting participants involved the impact of the public Pre-K program on ECE programs and providers across state. As mentioned in earlier sections of the report, stakeholders discussed how state-funded Pre-K took away from other parts of the B-5 system. Providers commented that it was difficult to compete with a program offering free early education to four-year-olds and how difficult it was to sustain a business by only providing care to younger children that required lower ratios and group sizes. Participants felt that MSDE needed to do more to ensure that the Pre-K program was coordinated with other programs so that communities and providers can better understand the need for slots:

“...Whatever we do to proceed with universal Pre-K in the state of Maryland, [it is important to know] that there are family child care providers, child care centers, that are going out of business because there’s not a coordination of where services are going... We don’t know in advance that there’s going to be a new Pre-K class somewhere, etc... so we can plan, or [help] the small businesses in child care that we need to assist in helping maintain that quality but really not compete with them as we expand Pre-K in the state...”

—*Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant*

Participants saw the collaboration between schools and community-based providers as a “win-win” and could not understand why there wasn’t more collaboration. One participant from Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, and Washington Counties Town Hall asked, “I think the challenge is the school systems don’t have the space all the time. And so don’t they need to reach out and have collaborations with community-based partners?”

“I think we also need to partner more. I’ve had situations here one child care center doesn’t have a vehicle and another does. I think we need to just do a lot more as a community. And the only way that we can do it, it’s very difficult for me as an individual to get the data. ...there has to be some other way for us to share information so that we can assist the parents.”

—*Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant*

“Montgomery County has a ton of nonprofits, like a lot of you do. That there’s so many people that help, but it’s confusing about who helps who and what their waitlist is and everyone has different criteria. It’s hard for the professionals to understand it, let alone explain it....I think some kind of data systems are needed that families get entered into the system so that we can kind of talk to each other because we don’t. You spend so much time trying to figure out where they are, so I think of a way to, and that takes a lot, but I feel like different agencies, the public schools, we could work better together to figure it out because....because sometimes you make 15 phone calls over the course of a week and you’ve gotten nowhere.”

—*Montgomery County Town Hall Participant*

Using a Client-Centered Approach as Coordination Strategy

Participants in Town Hall meetings urged Maryland agencies to take a client-centered approach in the delivery of B-5 programs and services. As discussed earlier, stakeholders discussed numerous issues with program coordination and the burden of federal regulations. Some Town Hall participants felt that these issues derived from a lack of understanding of and empathy for providers and families in need of services in Maryland. As one Town Hall participant noted:

“And I think part of the problem that we have...stems from people who work higher up in the organizations, such as you, may have never worked in a child care facility. So rules and regulations are being created but you have no idea what it feels like to be on the ground.”

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

Town Hall participants went to great lengths to describe the client experience from both the provider and the family perspectives. Stakeholders expressed hope for better delivery approaches that were informed by how providers and families preferred to learn about, access, and use services across the system. As the facilitator of one of the Town Hall meetings summarized the conversation:

“...It [is]... bringing to mind...a method called ‘design thinking.’ A core principle of design thinking is empathy for the client and...thinking about what is the experience of the person who has to go through this and really thinking about the process from their perspective.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall facilitator

Increasing Case Management Services

Families often need multiple programs and services to support their well-being, yet system fragmentation leads to missed opportunities for access to the full set of needed services. Town Hall participants suggested providing more case management services and navigators as a useful approach to coordinating different programs and services at the family level. As Town Hall participants noted:

“... I am interested in advocating for more case management for our families.... I work with the Judy Center. One family has been involved with the Judy Center and she has a...case manager and he and I sit often together and work to coordinate services. He can do some things that I cannot. We also make sure we’re delivering the same message. So we’re able to be consistent and compassionate.”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

“And I would really like to see us work better together. Build bridges instead of silos, because I do think there’s a lot of duplication of services going on and duplication of agencies and we’re not sure what everybody’s doing. So, if there was a better way for us to connect to talk about families, through case management or service coordination I think that will benefit families all around.”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

Town Hall participants from Head Start programs agreed with the stronger case management approach and discussed the effectiveness of this approach in coordinating services for Head Start families.

“...I think, you know, working with Head Start, we have that advantage of having family support [workers]... that really work closely with the families, connecting them and making those calls, or going with them to the Department of Social Services. So really looking at that as a piece...for future opportunities.”

—Baltimore City and Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

Expanding Judy Centers

Expanding on the conversation of case management services, Town Hall participants discussed the important role of the Judy Centers in supporting families as they navigate across the B-5 system, as well as their role in providing critical trainings and community supports. Participants highlighted how families benefitted from Judy Centers’ work in navigating the system to provide tailored services and supports to meet family needs.

“I would say our county Judy Center is a strong collaborator... we have a model... where there’s an education piece of the Judy Center and the family support piece.”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

In fact, participants saw the Judy Centers as the main hub for coordinating services in the community. As one participant noted:

“So they’re kind of the link. The Judy Center really has that flexibility...[They] really identified the most needy families and pull together the resources, ...reaching that Birth to Five population that’s not in programs. So, I think it’s really going back to your Judy Centers...having them form...partnerships with lead agencies and pulling those groups together to have this conversation because it’s hard for Head Start, public schools, health department, social services, to make the time to do that, but the Judy Center can.”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

Other Town Hall participants agreed with the valuable role of the Judy Centers. In sharing information about training to support a trauma-informed community, one participant from the Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall stated, “... I know that we couldn’t have made that possible without the Judy Center funds.”

Using Technology and Data Effectively for System Coordination

Across the Town Hall meetings, participants identified needs around technology and data, with an emphasis on developing a services portal where families can easily identify what services are available and take appropriate steps to access those services. There was also strong support for a unique identifier in the early childhood data system to improve coordination and transitions for children between early childhood programs. Other participants discussed the need to analyze data with an equity lens and at the county-level.

Develop a services portal

Several participants expressed the need for Maryland families to be able to access services through a central location. Some suggested creating an app for families to navigate services, which would help reduce the burden placed on the individual parent or provider when obtaining the information they need. As Town Hall participants explained:

“If there were a single database where I could plug in and say, this is what I’m looking for, this is what my needs are, this is what I need for my family, where do i go? And it would pop up for me. That’s what they need. That’s what I need.”

—Prince George’s County Town Hall Participant

“...Maybe you could have some sort of app when somebody applies for a service that they are in the database. Oh, they have a two-year-old, next year let’s start seeing about preschool or Head Start. I mean, I don’t understand, there’s so many different programs. Those programs should be communicating amongst each other about these children who are getting nothing. You know. So that’s my concern.”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Others spoke about the need for data in order for community organizations to develop partnerships and better communicate and connect with each other:

“Montgomery County has a ton of nonprofits, like a lot of you do. That there’s so many people that help, but it’s confusing about who helps who and what their waitlist is and everyone is different criteria. It’s hard for the professionals to understand it, let alone explain it....I think some kind of data system [is] needed that families get entered into the system so that we can...talk to each other because we don’t. You spend so much time trying to figure out where [the services] are...but I feel like different agencies, the public schools, we could work better together to figure it out because....sometimes you make 15 phone calls over the course of a week and you’ve gotten nowhere.”

—Montgomery County Town Hall Participant

Support for a unique identifier

Several town hall participants talked about the value of developing a unique identifier for children. A unique identifier would help with the issue of transiency by following children across different jurisdictions while also reducing disruption in access/delivery of early childhood services. Participants also spoke about the issue of parents having to report the same information in multiple places to get access to services and suggested this information be shared across agencies. A Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant said, “Once you get that information, I don’t understand why all of the agencies don’t have it. Why [do] we have to continuously present the information.” Other Town Hall participants noted:

“I have a frustration with the fact that we can’t get a state ID in place for students...the first time they access service anywhere. Because I think that [will] address... the transiency. If they had a state ID and the benefits and things followed them from Baltimore City to Baltimore County or within one or the other jurisdictions, ...we could much more quickly get kids back into what they need if there was a state ID.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

“As a Judy Center...we look at a lot of data and some of the data we’re missing... I think most of it could be cleared up with a statewide ID that’s assigned shortly after birth. Because we’re doing things like give them massage or even doing prenatal massage, playgroups, pre-k, we’re trying to figure out what works best and what is the most helpful. And so if there is a statewide ID, we can just click it in there. When the child starts kindergarten, we can look at that real data and see exactly what they’ve been doing. The kindergarten teacher can know what’s been happening, everything would be so much smoother and easier connected.”

—Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant

Others brought up the need for data/information sharing as part of coordination and planning for transitions (e.g., when a child moves from early childhood programs to the school system, between programs, etc.) and to track outcomes over time for families who accessed services. The participants noted:

“But, it really would be helpful to find a way to actually get the data for the Head Start programs so that we can start to see how many children are transitioning from Head Start into the public school.”

—Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Talbot Counties Town Hall Participant

“...We took...key agencies in Anne Arundel County—school, health, DSS, Head Start—and we had a universal shared data system through ‘efforts to outcomes’ software. Each agency could enter families with their control and permission into the database... And the software then allows different agencies to connect with each other to say heads up, I finished my piece, it’s your turn now. “

—Anne Arundel and Howard Counties Town Hall Participant

“I am a Director of the Family Support Center at Frederick County and that’s something I’ve been wishing for, for a very, very long time. It would be great to be able to know how the children have done that started out at a Family Support Center.”

—Allegany, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Washington Counties Town Hall Participant

Other data needs to support coordination: Equity lens and service mapping

Town Hall participants discussed other coordination issues that could be supported through data. Stakeholders discussed the need to use an equity lens when analyzing data to uncover the racial and income inequities that lead to uneven access and participation in high-quality early childhood programs.

A Town Hall participant from Prince George’s County Town Hall said, “I feel like it is buried somewhere in the EXCELS disparity between programs that choose to participate and accept subsidy and the programs that are like, I don’t need to do that.”

Town Hall participants in Prince George’s County and Cecil and Harford Counties requested a mapping of services at the state and local levels to help assess what types of services are available for families with young children (birth to five) and identify potential gaps:

“Well, even just for the [Early Childhood Advisory Council] group, even just a scan, mapping absolutely everything coming from the state that would focus on birth to five would be really helpful because we’re trying to kind of figure that out at the local level.”

—Cecil and Harford Counties Town Hall Participant

Creating a substitute database

As discussed earlier in the report, Town Hall participants discussed the issue of making training and professional development more convenient for programs and providers. One solution was for the state to create a database of substitute teachers that could be used to cover classrooms when training was required and when providers called in sick. Town Hall participants felt that the state could take this on. One Town Hall participant from Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant noted, “It seems like something very easy for the state to solve, to maintain fingerprints and background checks of the list of substitutes...”

Other Town Hall participants agreed:

“The fact that we don’t have a central database for substitutes who have already been approved..., and we have to go to the expense of getting someone...background check[ed], and also that same person having multiple background checks in order to substitute in multiple centers. ...it makes no sense whatsoever.”

—*Baltimore City/Baltimore County Town Hall Participant*

Data privacy

Finally, although data systems hold promise for making programs more accessible to families and data sharing easier for programs, it is important to note that several participants expressed concerns over data privacy, particularly for undocumented immigrants and their families. For example:

“At a policy level, and I talked about registries early on...[and] protecting data. Really important that [we] would protect the data of our families so that if there is any kind of a callback from the federal government around data, that they can’t access that data of what families got what services, because that has a tremendous impact on what happens... to our families.”

—*Montgomery County Town Hall Participant*

Considerations for the PDG B-5 Strategic Plan

The discussions at the Town Hall meetings provide important insights into the needs of children, families, and providers in Maryland. These needs, along with the issues raised about coordination, collaboration, and quality of ECE programs, should be taken into consideration as MSDE engages in the strategic planning process. Below are six areas for Maryland to consider as it develops initiatives to include in its strategic plan that would support more equitable access to all ECE provider types, better support coordination and collaboration across different programs and services for children, improve quality, and support parental choice.

Consideration 1: Maryland's strategic plan should address how the state will expand current ECE programs and services to meet the needs of Maryland's children and families.

Town Hall participants spoke at length about the lack of capacity of Maryland's programs to serve all of the state's vulnerable children and families requiring services. Stakeholders noted that numerous programs and services were at capacity, including Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, Judy Centers, the Maryland Pre-K program, Resource Centers, the Home Visitation program, and programs serving children with disabilities. These capacity issues mean that families go without services or experience long wait times for services. Finding ways to expand the current services to serve additional children and families should be a key goal of the state's strategic planning effort.

Consideration 2: Maryland's strategic plan should address how the value of high-quality ECE and the availability of services are communicated to Maryland families.

Stakeholders raised a number of issues in the Town Hall meetings that focused on how information is communicated to stakeholders. Town Hall participants believed better communication between MSDE and early childhood stakeholders, including parents, could address many of the issues raised related to awareness of program availability, fear and stigma associated with accessing services, service coordination, and parental education regarding child development and the importance of high-quality ECE.

As the Town Hall participants noted, it will be important in the strategic plan that the state consider the many different types of Maryland's families when thinking about communications and outreach strategies. Maryland families are diverse, ranging from grandparents raising grandchildren to single teen mothers. Families in Maryland speak several different languages and have different cultural norms. Accordingly, this diversity must be considered when developing a multi-modal communication system to provide Maryland's vulnerable families with information related to the ECE system. In addition, while the Town Hall meetings were an important first step in better understanding the needs of Maryland children, families, and providers, Maryland should continue to find ways to understand the experiences of the children and families as they navigate the ECE system.

Consideration 3: Maryland's strategic plan should continue to build on state quality improvement initiatives, particularly addressing the capacity of the state's early childhood workforce.

It is clear from Town Hall meetings that Maryland has one of the most advanced quality improvement systems in the country. EXCELS, credentialing, accreditation and the associated training and professional development make for a robust quality improvement system. Stakeholders noted that one drawback of the extensive quality improvement initiatives is the complexity of the different components of the quality improvement system. Accordingly, efforts to build on the quality improvement system in the strategic plan must work to streamline and integrate the different system components in order for the state's ECE stakeholders to better understand the distinctions between them.

Perhaps more importantly, the state must include initiatives in the strategic plan that support the development of the early childhood workforce. This includes addressing all aspects of the system that are designed to support workforce development including respect for the profession, pre-service and in-service training, compensation and benefits, and workplace environments. Again, stakeholders emphasized

that these initiatives must be created with all sectors of the current workforce in mind and an understanding of the impact of rules and regulations on the current workforce.

Consideration 4: Maryland’s strategic plan should address how the expansion of the state’s Prekindergarten program will be better coordinated with the other ECE programs and services that children and families need to thrive.

Town Hall participants discussed ongoing coordination issues between Pre-K programs and other child care programs. The Maryland Pre-K program serves four-year-old children that would otherwise be served by the state’s market-based child care providers. Four-year-olds are the most cost effective for child care providers to serve because of the larger adult to child ratios and bigger group sizes. Stakeholders discussed that taking those four-year-olds out of the market-based system has a financial impact on providers, which is passed on to parents with younger children and also impacts the capacity and price of care for children younger than three. The Kirwan Commission for Innovation and Excellence in Education is proposing a significant expansion in the state Pre-K program to serve three- and four-year-olds at no cost for families up to 300 percent of the federal poverty threshold and four-year-olds on a sliding scale up to 600 percent of the federal poverty level. Maryland’s strategic plan should address how this expansion will be implemented to support all aspects of Maryland’s provider community and how the state will address the supply and quality of infant and toddler care while expanding the Pre-K program.

In addition, with the expansion of Pre-K in Maryland, it will be important to include initiatives within the strategic plan that help connect children in these new Pre-K slots to the services that they may need. Town Hall participants discussed the ways in which Head Start programs use family service workers to connect children and families to other services they may need with a similar role played by the Judy Centers in a relatively small number of Title I schools across the state. A significant expansion of the Pre-K program will require a corresponding expansion in mechanisms by which children and families are connected to services.

Consideration 5: Maryland’s strategic plan should include initiatives to support seamless transitions between ECE providers and schools.

Town Hall participants discussed the lack of connection and sometimes adversarial relationship between the schools and the ECE providers. Often, ECE providers do not feel that they are respected by the school systems and school systems are often concerned about the school readiness of children attending ECE programs in their communities. MSDE is uniquely positioned to support stronger collaboration and coordination between the schools and early childhood providers. As such, the strategic plan should include initiatives that bridge the gap between ECE providers and schools and work to develop one continuum of high-quality early childhood care and education starting at birth through kindergarten entry.

Consideration 6: Maryland’s strategic plan should address the state’s data system and ways in which the state can track children to reduce duplication of services and the burden on families.

Town Hall participants highlighted the need for a robust data system to support access to services, better coordination between programs, and a better understanding of the impact of different ECE programs on child well-being and school readiness. Accordingly, Maryland’s strategic plan should include initiatives that continue to build out the state’s data system, including the development of a unique identifier for children to track their progress through the ECE system, the services that are accessed, and the impact of those services.

Through the development and implementation of a PDG B-5 strategic plan that addresses these considerations, Maryland will move closer to its ultimate vision of “one community working together” to support children in building a strong foundation for success in school and in life.

Appendix A: Town Hall Facilitation Guide

Maryland Preschool Development Grant Birth through 5 Town Hall Meetings

Facilitation Guide

Introduction

We just heard an overview from three state agencies about the work they are doing to support young children and their families in Maryland. Now we want to hear from you.

This conversation should last about an hour, and we are interested in hearing about the joys and challenges of supporting young children in Maryland to be happy, healthy and ready for success in school and beyond. There are no right or wrong answers in a Town Hall, just your perspectives and your experiences. The information you provide will help create a plan that helps Maryland's state agencies and local communities to coordinate and provide high-quality early care and education services for all families with young children across the state.

We will be recording the Town Hall so we can transcribe the session to make sure that we are accurately capturing your thoughts and feedback. The information from the meeting will be combined with input from other Town Hall meetings across the state and the findings will be put in a report with recommendations to help state agencies and programs be more responsive to the needs of Maryland families. We may use quotes from the Town Halls in the reports but we won't attribute quotes to specific persons.

Also, as part of the Town Hall, I'm going to ask you to take a few minutes to fill out a survey. We will do that toward the end of the session. This way we will have information on a specific set of questions and you will have the opportunity to give input even if you don't have a chance to talk, or would rather express your opinions in writing. There is a code on your agenda and we'll project a code on the screen that you can scan with the camera on your smart phone or complete on paper.

People may share opinions with which you disagree, but it is important to be respectful of the person talking, even if you might have a different perspective or experience. We ask that you let the person speaking finish and to raise your hand if you want to say something. I promise to do my best to make sure that everyone who wants to speak has a chance to do so. We are looking forward to hearing about your experiences and having an engaging dialogue. We have folks to bring a microphone to you so be sure to wait so everyone can hear your remarks.

Does that sound ok to everyone? Are there any questions before we begin?

Questions

- 1) **I wanted to start by getting your reaction to the overview that the speakers provided about how the different agencies work to support children and families? Tell me what you were thinking as they discussed the different initiatives and their work?**
 - a. Were you aware of the programs and services they discussed? If so, which ones?
 - b. Were there things you thought that were missing, or wanted them to say?
 - c. What questions did you have?
- 2) **What do you feel are the greatest challenges faced by families with young children in your community?**
 - a. Why is it a challenge?
 - b. What supports and services would be most helpful in overcoming the challenges?
 - c. If there was one person, service, program, or other resource that could be offered or created that would help, what would it be?
- 3) **When you as a parent – or parents with whom you work – are looking for child care arrangements, what are they looking for?**
 - a. What would a high-quality program look like?
 - b. What is the single most important aspect of quality from your perspective?
 - c. How hard is it to find high-quality early care and education in your community?
 - d. Why do you think it is so hard?

- 4) **What do you see as the biggest factor needed to improve the quality of child care in your community?**
 - a. Better teachers?
 - b. Better facilities?
 - c. Better curriculum?
 - d. More in tune with the language and culture of the families in the community?
- 5) **What is the hardest thing about getting service for the children and families in the community? What makes access to services hard? What would make it easier?**
 - a. Would someone be willing to share their experience attempting to get services?
 - b. What about services for families who don't speak English?
 - c. If a parent was concerned that her child had a developmental delay or disability, where could she go or what could she do?
 - d. What services or programs would you like to have access to that you don't right now?
- 6) **What do you think the community is doing well to support children and families that might be helpful for other communities to do?**
 - a. What is the secret to their success?
- 7) **If a family in your community needs help—with finding child care, housing, or paying bills—where would they go?**
 - a. How well coordinated are the services that families need? There are a number of different state agencies that work to support children and families—we heard from three of them earlier—what can they do to better coordinate the services they provide?
- 8) **The goal of an early care and education program is to prepare children for success in school. I was wondering if we could talk for a few minutes about how much connection there is between the early childhood programs and the schools in your community? What does the level of connection mean for children and families in the transition from early childhood programs into elementary schools?**
 - a. Children can also move from program to program, or from a child care program into state Pre-K. We are all interested in how often children transition from one program to another in your community. Do children move between child care arrangements a lot?
 - b. What happens when a child transitions to a new program? Are there records that are transferred? Is there any system?
- 9) **What information would be helpful to this community to better understand the services that children and family need? Are there systems in place to collect information about how the community may be changing over time and the impact that programs are having on children and families?**
- 10) **What else should state and local leaders know about the needs of families and children in your community?**

Conclusion

Thank you so much for being a part of this conversation. Before we close this part of the program, I want to give everyone an opportunity to complete our short survey. We have projected a QR code on the screen. If you have a smart phone you can open the camera and point it toward the screen or to the code on your agenda. We also have paper surveys. If you'd like a paper survey, please put up your hand and we'll get one to you. This is an opportunity for you to share anything you wanted to talk about related to early care and education that I did not give you the opportunity to talk about or expand your thoughts. I want to thank you in advance for providing this critical input and being part of planning a better future for Maryland's children.

And now I'm going to turn the program back over to Keri from Ready At Five.