



Maryland Education Coalition

The Maryland Education Coalition is dedicated to raising the academic achievement of students in Maryland public schools by promoting adequate funding and systemic accountability for improving results.

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Testimony before the Ways and Means Committee and Budget and Taxation Committee In Support with Amendments of House Bill 297 and Senate Bill 332 Pre-K for All Expansion Act of 2014 February 12, 2014

Today, thousands of Maryland's four-year olds lack access to a quality pre-kindergarten program. Only 35 percent of four-year olds have access to the state's current half-day pre-k program, while an additional six percent are enrolled in Head Start and five percent are enrolled in special education pre-k. The remaining 54 percent of children are either home with parents or family, in an informal childcare arrangement, or enrolled in private center-based programs of varying quality. Between 2002 and 2009, Maryland increased access to half-day pre-k programs for low-income students with household incomes up to 185% of the Federal Poverty Level. MEC applauds this initial effort to ensure students most at-risk for starting kindergarten at a disadvantage have access to quality pre-k programs. We are encouraged by the interest in continuing the expansion of service after five years of success.

MEC supports efforts to improve the equity of educational opportunity throughout the state. Continuing to phase-in services in the Prekindergarten for All Expansion Act by making programs serving up to 300% of the Federal Poverty Level eligible for competitive grants is a continuation of Maryland's commitment to equity. Studies show that incoming kindergarteners who did not participate in a high-quality pre-k experience were often not ready for school and did not have the same reading, behavioral or comprehension skills as their peers who had quality pre-k experiences. Providing high-quality pre-k to more economically disadvantaged students affords the ability to close this readiness gap, and, more importantly, begin to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their wealthier peers.

Ensuring that private providers selected to participate are in partnership with local school systems enables a more thoughtful and sustainable approach to funding this important expansion of service. Additionally, allowing the competitive grants to be used to expand programs from half-day to full-day pre-k recognizes the importance of full-day programs to students and families, especially those with low-incomes. It is important that throughout the process of awarding these new grants the state take into consideration districts that have already made the decision that full-day programs were an essential investment in their students such as Baltimore City and Kent County.

HB 297 and SB 332 require the upcoming adequacy study of the Thornton Funding Formula to include universal pre-k as a key aspect of the study. The state currently requires districts to provide pre-k to all four-year-olds up to 185% of the Federal Poverty Level. However, state funding for pre-k is not allocated on a per-pupil basis and, in fact, provides the same amount of funding for a district if they serve 50 or 500 pre-k students. This current funding approach does not cover the state's share of pre-k and does not generate a local share causing districts to use other resources to meet the state mandate. Including pre-k in the adequacy study is critical and this funding problem needs to be fixed.

The Maryland Education Coalition supports this bill, but does recommend two amendments:

1. The goal of the General Assembly should be to reach voluntary, universal pre-k. This intent should be made clear in the language of the bill by adding; “It is the intent of the General Assembly that pre-k be included in school funding formula based on enrollment with the option to provide funding for full-day programing after Thornton Adequacy Study is completed. Efforts to phase-in universal pre-k should continue to prioritize economically disadvantage students first to ensure children most in need of quality early learning opportunities have access to programs.”
2. Additionally, the Prekindergarten Expansion Grant Program should sunset after pre-k becomes included in the Thornton formula.

These two recommendations will help lead us on the path to ensuring voluntary, high-quality pre-kindergarten for all Maryland children.

We urge you to support the Pre-K Expansion Act of 2014 with amendments. Thank you.