

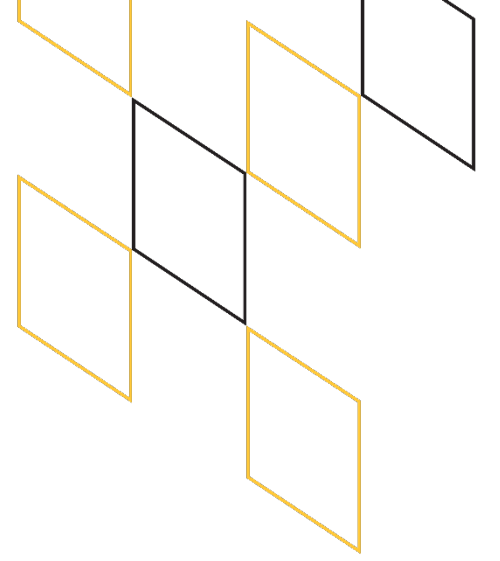


First Steps, Strong Start

Jena Smith and Dr. Nykia Washington

Presented By | Maryland State Department of Education

March 19, 2026



Public Pre-Kindergarten

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future

Passed in 2021, the Blueprint (H.B. 1372) established a 10-year plan to significantly increase state education funding. It is built around five key pillars aimed at enriching student experiences, accelerating outcomes, and enhancing education quality statewide.

Pillar 1: Early Childhood Education

Overview

Recognizing the **critical foundation** set during children's early years, Blueprint Pillar 1 emphasizes **equitable early education opportunities** that prepare all children for school and for success.

Increasing Access & Quality



Expands full-day Pre-K at no cost for eligible 3 and 4-year-olds.



Requires participation in state quality rating improvement system (Maryland EXCELS) for publicly funded prekindergarten programs.

Maryland's Pre-K Program and High-Quality Early Learning

Teacher Education and Credentials

319 classrooms in the FY26 Pre-K Expansion Grant

38 teachers meet Lead Teacher requirements through the 10-year experience pathway



Other Lead Teachers have at least a Bachelor's Degree

Classroom Practice



In FY27, MSDE will expand the use of the CLASS® tool to support program quality

Program Standards

Maryland EXCELS Quality Ratings among grantee sites:

56% Quality Rating 5

24% Quality Rating 4

19% Quality Rating 3

Increase in Statewide Pre-K Enrollment

School Year	Private Pre-K Enrollment	LEA Pre-K Enrollment	Total Pre-K (LEA and Private)
2018-2019	514	30,941	31,455
2019-2020	927	32,182	33,109
2020-2021	1,456	23,609	25,065
2021-2022	1,504	27,757	29,261
2022-2023	1,277	30,716	31,993
2023-2024	1,460	31,379	32,839
2024-2025	1,919	32,084	34,003
2025-2026	2,529	30,538	33,067

Statewide Pre-K enrollment has increased over time, despite a slight decrease in SY 2026. Enrollment in private Pre-K providers is growing at a faster rate than in LEAs.

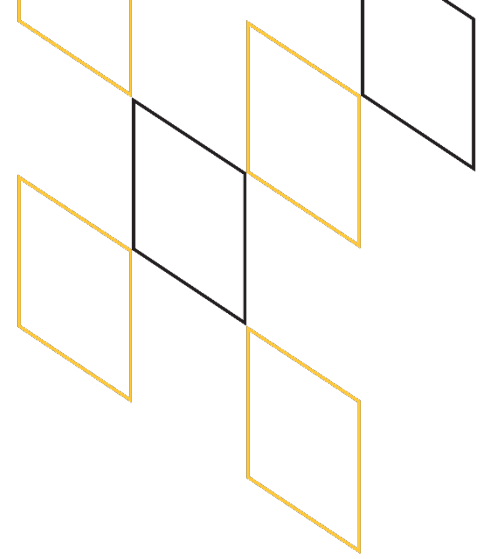
Baltimore City Pre-K Enrollment

School Year	Private Pre-K Enrollment	LEA Pre-K Enrollment	Total Pre-K (LEA and Private)
SY 2023	177	3,767	3,944
SY 2024	223	3,916	4,139
SY 2025	328	3,812	4,140
SY 2026	439	3,674	4,113

Baltimore City's Pre-K enrollment has increased over time, despite a slight decrease in SY 2026. Enrollment in private Pre-K providers has more than doubled while LEA enrollment has decreased slightly.

Early Childhood Quality

Maryland EXCELS and Quality



Increasing Access to High-Quality Care and Education

Child Care Centers and Family Child Care Homes with Quality Ratings 3-5

2024	1,230
2025	1,407
2026	1,725

40% increase in eligibility to participate in Pre-K Expansion since January 2024.



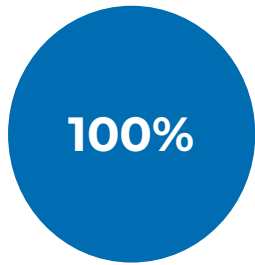
72% of all licensed child care programs participate in Maryland EXCELS.



Maryland EXCELS continues to increase family access to high-quality early learning experiences across Maryland.

Maryland EXCELS Participation in Baltimore City

Public Pre-K Programs

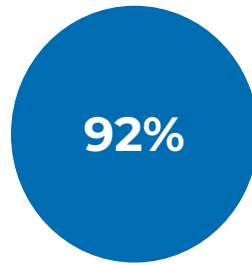


All public Pre-K programs in Maryland are required to participate.

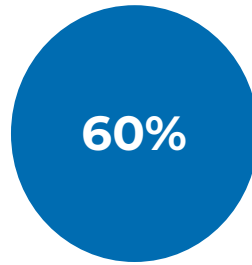


Public Pre-K programs operating in Baltimore City.

Child Care Programs



of all licensed child care programs in Baltimore City participate in EXCELS.



of all licensed programs that participate in EXCELS in Baltimore City are family child care programs.

5,012 total child care centers, family child care, and public pre-k programs participate in Maryland EXCELS.

Maryland EXCELS Ratings in Baltimore City

Public Pre-K Quality Ratings

12

Pre-K programs in Baltimore City (32%) have a quality rating of 4 or 5.

4-5

These quality ratings require measuring children's developmental progress and aligning curriculum to those results, among other requirements.

Child Care Quality Ratings

105

Child care centers in Baltimore City (46%) have a quality rating of 3, 4, or 5.

100

Family child care programs in Baltimore City (29%) have a quality rating of 3, 4, or 5.



Division of Early Childhood

Upcoming Work to Expand Access to High Quality Early Learning

Preschool Development Grant Birth Through 5 (PDG B-5)

Division of Early Childhood (DEC) awarded a one-year \$14.75 million grant to spend in 2026 to update Maryland's early childhood needs assessment, strategic plan, and to advance several priorities:

Unifying the Early Childhood System



Aligning workforce advancement pathways



Centralizing Pre-K enrollment portal



Expanding EXCELS Find A Program Tool

Expanding Access, Quality, and Sustainability



Sharing services and resource hubs



Expanding instructional quality assessments (CLASS, LENA)

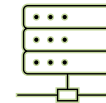


Integrating high quality instructional materials (HQIM)

Aligning and Sharing Data Systems



Modernizing child care background checks



Enhancing child care licensing portal



Embedding user-centered design in all systems

Preschool Development Grant Birth Through 5 (PDG B-5)

The PDG B-5 grant supports reconciling fragmented elements into a unified early childhood system, including supporting the development of a centralized Pre-K enrollment portal.

Implementing a Centralized Pre-K Enrollment and Application System

Current System Issues

Managed site-by-site.

List of approved grantees available on the MSDE DEC and LEA websites.

No real-time enrollment availability provided.

Improved System Goals



Single, user-friendly portal for all publicly funded Pre-K programs across MD's mixed-delivery system.



Integrated space for materials submission and communication.



Real-time data within comprehensive directory.