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# CITY OF BALTIMORE

Brandon M. Scott – Mayor  
Zeke Cohen – Council President



## Office of Council Services

Nancy Mead - Director  
100 Holliday Street, Room 415  
Baltimore, MD 21202

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# EDUCATION, YOUTH, & OLDER ADULTS COMMITTEE

The Honorable John Bullock  
CHAIR

## HEARING NOTES

LO25-0040

*First Steps, Strong Start: Early Learning in Baltimore City*

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**Hearing Date:** 3/19/2026

**Hearing Start Time:** 12:03 PM

**Hearing End Time:** 3:43 PM

**Location:** Du Burns Council Chamber / Webex

**Total Estimated Attendance:** around 30 people

**Committee Members in Attendance:**

- **Chair** John Bullock
- Sharon Green Middleton
- Jermaine Jones
- **Vice Chair** Mark Parker
- James Torrence
- Odette Ramos

**Additional Councilmembers in Attendance**

- Paris Gray
  - Zeke Cohen
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### **MAJOR SPEAKERS**

*(This is NOT an attendance record.)*

- **India Ivery from Lin's Kids**
  - **Olutunde Clarke, Co-Chair of Baltimore City Early Childhood Advisory Council**
  - **Casey Peeks, Senior Director of Early Childhood Policy at Center for American Progress**
  - **Jenna Smith from Maryland State Department of Education**
  - **Dr. Debra Brooks from the Mayor's Office of Children and Family Success**
  - **Denine Rafus, Baltimore City Head Start Administrator from Catholic Charities**
  - **Rudi Zelman, Program Director of Pre-k Expansion from the Fund for Educational Excellence**
  - **Melissa Broome and Crystal Francis from Baltimore City Public Schools**
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**NOTES**

- The Chair gave remarks on how early education is very needed and how he was in a Head Start classroom when he was a child.
- The Council President Cohen gave remarks. He stated how most of the members here today are parents. He shared how Pre-k was life changing for his children. Baltimore should be a city that embraces childcare learning. The Council President thanked the Chair for hosting these hearings on childcare and mentioned the struggles in childcare that the council learned about in the last hearing in January.
- The Chair then opened to presentations beginning with Baltimore City Early Childhood Advisory Council being represented by Olutunde Clarke who is the Co-Chair.
- The next was a featured public testimony by India Ivery from Lin's Kids
- The presentations then moved to Casey Peeks, Senior Director, Early Childhood Policy for the Center for American Progress
- The presentation to follow is from Maryland State Department for Education, Jenna Smith and Dr. Nikea Washington
- The next presentation was Mayors Office of Family Success, where Dr. Brooks presented
- Following MOFS, Denine Rafus from Christian Charities presented.
- After Christian Charities, the Fund of Education Excellence, Rudi Zelman presented.
- Crystal Francis and Melissa Broome from Baltimore City Public Schools gave their presentation.
- The Chair then went to Public Testimony.
- The Council President asked Casey Peaks from the Center for American Progress, mentioned how Boston is the best model, what are they doing in the mix delivery and how they did their partnership and how Baltimore can benefit from this
  - Answer: Boston has a community that has a wide range of people involved. Made sure to not just have private providers but home-based. Have a city-wide curriculum but also training to be able to implement that.
- Vice President Middleton mentioned how diverse the city is and how Head Start has seen that diversity. Is there any strategies that they can implement or new to be culturally responsive for our early learning program?
  - Denine from Christian Charities responded and stated it is meeting people where they are. Having staff that are bilingual in areas where that is needed. Having training and workshops between parents and staff to build trust, also offer these to families that are not enrolled.
  - Dr. Brooks from MOFS added that staff are trained in know your rights. For example, if families come in that can be targeted by ice there is plenty of information within the building to share that information. Make sure the materials they use is culturally diverse and appropriate
- Vice President Middleton added in the resources and the need within local schools.
  - ECAC stated that parents are a voice and if there is an ICE issue in an area people may not want to do events there following. Being able to connect with the community to make sure

the parents are safe. Head Start families are mainly below the poverty levels. ECAC is the voice to be able to speak with the school system on behalf of Head Start and parents.

- Councilman Jones mentioned the importance of expanding. One concern he has is the challenges of giving adequate benefits and wages to employees. If there is expansion in the system it should not be a broken system. So, what is the process/plan to fix/address the wages issues for staff? He would like to be a partner in addressing this issue.
  - Answer: ECAC, within the Head Start model they are focused on the idea of the slot method. Another strategy is to turn to the state pre-k program and receive funding from there.
- Councilman Gray asked Public Schools, could they go into why seats are going unfilled and what are the common areas they are seeing from families?
  - Answer: Schools are for 6 ½ hours. Some families only choose 1 school and if that school is full, they are not willing to go to other available schools. There are other opportunities for families to find schools that may not be within public schools and are willing to help with that.
- Councilman Gray asked MSDE, how has the enrollment system help families know where to go
  - Answer: Find a program directory that expands beyond childcare, pre-k both in private and public schools. Being able to identify what is in their area and what is within their needs. Able to find available enrollment that is in real time and in real need. Consider an enrollment HUB where families can find and message as well as enroll. The goal is to make it easy and comprehensive in a one-stop shop.
  - Follow up question is are they measuring the students attending or just enrollment.
    - Answer: they are using more enrollment but looking at outcomes from the students. As seats are being filled, as capacity is being built, the teachers there are giving as much outcome for the students
- Vice Chair Parker asked ECAC, remind the council of what the public pre-k subsidy per student is for the next school year.
  - Answer: \$19,900 per child.
- Vice Chair Parker asked Rudi from the Fund, some of the seats converted into a public pre-k seat, of the increase, how many were generally new seats or converted seats
  - Answer: The fund does not have that exact data, but it is that private seats going public when there are converted seats becoming public.
- Vice Chair Parker asked about subsidy from Montgomery County, can they share more
  - Answer: Montgomery County invest in their early childcare. They have a local subsidy that is supplemental to a childcare scholarship. To assist with families that are needed in support but may not qualify for other scholarships
- Vice Chair Parker asked MSDE, how much is the childcare program funded between federal and state
  - MSDE will follow up on that data

- Vice Chair Parker asked with kindergarten readiness, can MSDE speak to a unify way that is consistent between the state and city. (Baltimore still uses this but the state does not)
  - Answer from Public Schools: Baltimore City implemented care independently.
- Is there a pathway to align the class system with EXCELS or something similar so that Head Start programs are not being penalized
  - Answer from ECAC: there are more level 4s or 5s now than what the data shows. The data has been delayed a little. But there needs to be more investment in that, but the data is better than it seems. It is a huge administrative burden and once you get to level 5 there is a financial burden, therefore some may not want to have to deal with that.
- Councilman Torrence asked to have they look into putting it near transit systems?
  - Answer: ECAC, childcare has a set a regulation that are different from regular school system. To go into healthcare facilities, it takes a different set of rules for them to do that.
- The chair moved to public testimony once again
- Councilman Torrence flagged that there is a bill in Congress that will provide a work study for Head Start
- Council President Cohen mentioned how it will take everyone to make this happen. This is an issue that whether you are a provider, parent, or educator, everyone has an interest in early learning.
- The Chair then took a quick break to transition to voting on bill 25-0100.

**Hearing Packet in bill file? -----**  **YES**  **NO**  **N/A**  
**Attendance Sheet in bill file? -----**  **YES**  **NO**  **N/A**  
**Agency reports read? -----**  **YES**  **NO**  **N/A**  
**Hearing televised or audio-digitally recorded? -----**  **YES**  **NO**  **N/A**  
**Certification of advertising/posting notices in the bill file? -----**  **YES**  **NO**  **N/A**  
**Evidence of notification to property owners in bill file? -----**  **YES**  **NO**  **N/A**

Notes by: Juliane Jemmott  
 Notes Date: 3/20/2026

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