

## **EARLY EDUCATION STUDY**

### **LWV CURRENT EARLY EDUCATION POSITION AND BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY**

With concern about the “achievement gap” a major priority throughout the country and here in Montgomery County, the LWVMC Education Committee recommended, and our members at the 2016 Annual Meeting approved, a study of early childhood education (and its potential for narrowing or closing that gap). We already had a relevant position, reached in a 2005 Child Care Study, but needed to gather current information about what was happening in early education in the county and see whether new positions were needed.

Our current position states our support for “a range of quality child care/early education programs, including home visiting, and emphasizing all-day programs, transportation and parent involvement such as: Head Start, community based Pre-K models, Montgomery County Public Schools Pre-K and Judy Centers.”

### **THE BIG PICTURE**

In recent years, early childhood education (ECE) has become a prominent issue for federal, state and local lawmakers, including those in Montgomery County. President Obama championed the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge with \$500 million dollars going to states with ECE plans. In 2013 came the Strong Starts for American Children Act awarding financial aid to states to expand their ECE. Globally, the First World Congress for Early Childhood Education met in September 2010 in Moscow. It was affirmed that all children have a right to ECE. Congressional leadership was charged with facilitating and monitoring progress of the member states and promoting the exchange of best practices. The United States did not participate.

The Pew Charitable Trust reports that “research demonstrates that children who attend high-quality Pre-K programs are more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to need special education. They also receive higher earnings as adults and are less likely to become dependent on government assistance.” Other studies have shown that high quality ECE also decreases the number of students repeating a grade and has long-term effects such a decreasing joblessness, homelessness and arrests for drug abuse.

Today, kindergartners are expected to achieve what once were the goals for first grade. Without Pre-K, many children may be starting school with a disadvantage.

### **KINDERGARTEN TODAY**

Kindergarten is no longer a vehicle for developing school readiness. In Montgomery County it is a full school day (9:00-3:00 PM) with lunch and one recess. It has changed from having a simple curriculum to a complex curriculum with standards that have to be met. By the end of the year students will be writing simple paragraphs and pass a reading test; they will count, compare and represent quantities and measurements and learn the rudiments of analysis. The MCPS Curriculum 2.0 adds to the core-tested

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subjects of reading and math an emphasis on critical, collaborative and creative thinking which may challenge the skills and maturity level of many five year olds. Children with no previous classroom experience and/or lacking a language rich environment at home may find transitioning to kindergarten as difficult as it once was to transition to first grade.

## **WHAT'S CURRENTLY HAPPENING IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY**

### **Pre-K and Head Start**

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) now has 12,000-13,000 students in each grade K-12. However, MCPS Pre-K is only available to those who have special needs or are income-eligible (public Pre-K).

The Montgomery County public Pre-K program currently accepts everyone who applies and is income-eligible and provides cost-free transportation. There is a combined application process for the public Pre-K program and the largely federally funded Head Start program, for which the number of slots available is determined by the funding level. The 2018 county budget included increased funding for the Head Start program to expand the number of classes available.

To be income-eligible for Head Start, a family's income must be at or below 100% of the federal poverty level (FPL); to be eligible for public Pre-K, a family's income must be at or below 185% of the federal poverty level FPL (the same as the cutoff for Free and Reduced Price Meals (FARMS)). Most of the public Pre-K programs are half-day (2.5 hours) although the Pre-K Plus grant offers 6.5 hours (a full school day) and has much higher income limitations (up to 300% of FPL). The Pre-K program also offers 238 slots and a 6.5 hour day in classes administered by 10 community-based providers.

Twenty-four of the Head Start sites have full school day programs and seven have half-day programs. Head Start serves both 3 and 4 year olds but Pre-K only takes four year olds. Applicants who are eligible for Head Start are assigned to those classes until the classes are full; then the rest are assigned to public Pre-K classes. Pre-K programs serve about 2,500 children. Head Start serves approximately 500. The Head Start program follows federal guidelines, but in Montgomery County the curriculum is similar to the public Pre-K curriculum. Both programs provide comprehensive services:

- Teachers use MCPS Curriculum 2.0
- Programs adhere to Maryland State standards
- Head Start program aligned with Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework
- Staff assist with the transition of children and families into kindergarten
- Ancillary staff of psychologists, speech pathologists, social workers and family service workers

All teachers are credentialed in early childhood education. There are currently 20 children to a teacher and an aide. The program provides free transportation and is usually able to place a child in the facility closest to their home or an alternate pick up site designated by their parent(s). There is a concerted effort to make parents partners who support of their child's learning. Parent outreach includes connecting parents to resources, such as English classes (with child care) and parent training sessions. Parents receive additional support in the form of crisis intervention and case management and each school is assigned a

family service worker. Both the Pre-K program and Head Start programs include visits from nurses and dental hygienists as well as vision and hearing screenings (provided by the county's Department of Health and Human Services). Information about the programs is widely distributed in many languages.

Other publicly-funded early childhood education programs and resources are available in the county. The two Judy Centers, early childhood centers designed to offer education support, family support and health related services, provide services for children age 1-5 at one location. These centers are primarily state-funded. Healthy Families Montgomery provides home visits to low-income first-time parents from before birth and for six months thereafter. Children with special needs identified by parents or pediatricians are referred to Child Find. The county's Infants & Toddlers Program, (federally funded) provides screening for developmental delays, or other issues.

### **Child Care**

Approximately 6,000 of the county's four year olds are in some form of child care/preschool, twice the number served by Head Start and public Pre-K. (OLO Report, p. 20) The State categorizes child care providers into 4 basic classes: child care centers, family child care, home/informal care and non-public nurseries All providers must be licensed to meet basic health and safety standards. Large family child care and child care centers must be registered. Child care centers can alternatively be accredited through NAYC, the National Association of Educators of Young Children.

Providers may also participate in EXCELS, a quality rating and improvement system that provides a common framework for assessing day care and preschool education facilities. The EXCELS rating system has 4 sets of guidelines dependent on the classification of the facility: free public school programs, child care centers (3 or more classes), family child care and home/informal care. Ratings range from one (licensing and a handbook) to five (60% of staff must have 4 year degrees).

Participation in EXCELS is voluntary and its application process and continuing education requirements can be costly and time consuming for providers. According to DHHS, which provides licensing, training and professional development assistance to providers, few licensed day care providers in the county participate in EXCELS. Further, many child care providers do not get licensed at all.

### **Child Care Subsidies**

Child care facilities become more expensive the higher their level of accreditation and child care subsidies are not always successful in offsetting the costs. Only the lowest-income families are eligible for assistance from the state's child care subsidy program (100% of FPL). To be eligible for the county program, Working Parents Assistance (WPA), parents must be working or in school and the child must be in licensed care (Grade 4 in EXCELS, which can cost as much as \$30,000 a year for a family of four with one preschooler and one school age child). There is a long wait list to apply for WPA and there have been many discussions about revising the income guidelines to meet the needs of more families.

### **Assessing Kindergarten Readiness**

The state's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA), administered to 10% of all incoming kindergarteners in the fall of each year, assesses their skills, knowledge and behaviors in language and

literacy, mathematics, social foundations, and physical well-being and motor development. The 2016-2017 MC assessment revealed that 49% of children tested were ready for kindergarten, 6 points above the state average. While many children who had attended child care centers or non-public preschools outperformed their lower income peers, KRA results indicate that Pre-K appears to address the achievement gap for children from low-income households (the majority of children currently attending public Pre-K). Kindergarteners who had one year of Pre-K were within 8 points of the county average while their lower income peers who had not attended Pre-K were only within 19 points.

## **HOW IS THE COUNTY RESPONDING TO THE ISSUE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

County leaders clearly are concerned about improving ECE and expanding its availability to more children. In 2016 the county created a new Child Care Policy officer in HHS to oversee the early childcare scene and help develop a comprehensive plan for how to improve the delivery of quality early childhood care and education - the HHS report **Montgomery County Early Care and Education Strategic Plan 2017** (Strategic Plan).

The strategic plan identifies five basic goals: high-quality care from birth to age 5 in all settings; affordable and accessible early care; an educated, diverse and well-compensated professional workforce; and continuity of service (i.e. ensuring that children's transitions from one form of schooling to another will be worry-free across ages and geography). It also clarifies some of the current barriers to providing quality care to all county children, regardless of income:

- Only children who meet the income guidelines currently have access to public Pre-K, but four out of ten children in the county are economically vulnerable, living below 300% of the FPL (\$71,550 for a family of 4). While it does reach some 2,500 children in the county, targeted Pre-K is insufficient to reach all of those in need and there is no guarantee that they will receive early education services.
- The State Child Care Subsidy and Local Working Parents Assistance (WPA) serve less than 1800 children out of an estimated 30,599 children under the age of six that would qualify with incomes below 300% of the FPL. While some parents complain of the complex application process, most cite costs as the main barrier to enrolling their children in quality early child care. The report explores ways to expand the WPA program to reach all eligible children, eliminating the current waiting list. The application has recently been made available on line and at EXCEL Centers. The goal is to provide a rate that aligns with the provider cost of quality care by FY 2019.
- There currently is not enough space to accommodate expansion of Pre-K in in MCPS or other county buildings. A mixed delivery system utilizing both publicly funded services such as Head Start and Pre-K and private child-care facilities and providers is a current reality and will be one going forward. This means that when increased public funding becomes available, new partnerships will need to be developed with high-quality private child-care providers to enable them to offer free and/or affordable programs.

- Only 12% of the child-care work-force in MC participate in the Maryland Child Care Credentialing Program. The county needs to work to bring child-care provider salaries into line with those of public school teachers in order to maintain a pool of high-quality child-care providers. Providers who do receive advanced credentials may have little financial incentive to remain working in an early care education program when the pay is not commensurate with the qualification. There is also a need for more teachers who speak other languages and are more representative of the diverse population of children the county serves.

### **OLO REPORT ON PRE-K IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY AND OTHER JURISDICTIONS**

Shortly after requesting the Strategic Plan, the county council commissioned the Office of Legislative Oversight to review the current child-care/early education landscape and assess the costs of expanding Pre-K.

The report of February 2017 states “High-quality Pre-K programs are one of the few social programs uniformly recognized by researchers, policy makers and advocates as yielding significant individual, community and societal benefits that far exceed their program costs. Every dollar investment in high-quality early Pre-K dollars yields a \$2 to \$8 return to government in reduced costs for remediation, special education and incarceration and increased tax revenues on participants’ earning in adulthood.” The report notes that the highest return (\$8) is garnered when low-income children receive high-quality Pre-K. (OLO Report, p. 1).

The OLO Report looks at the strategies used in 13 other jurisdictions that have expanded their Pre-K programs to universal Pre-K (80% enrollment of all age-eligible children regardless of income). Most other jurisdictions have phased in universal Pre-K over a period of years (it took West Virginia 10); others, like New York City, have managed with no phase-in (New York City’s was established with a state grant of \$500 million over five years). Due to space limitations noted in the Strategic Plan, the report concludes that a “mixed delivery system” will be required as Pre-K expands. An expansion might be phased in like this:

1. A full day of targeted Pre-K for income-eligible students
2. Targeted Pre-K for low and moderate income families (up to 300% of the Federal Poverty Line)
3. Universal Pre-K with a sliding scale for high-income families (paid fees cover the difference over 300% of FPL after options 1 and 2 are implemented)
4. Universal Pre-K with a 100% subsidy for all families (estimating the public costs of offsetting parent fees)

The Report also notes that both the current Head Start and public Pre-K programs already meet best practice standards (i.e., small teacher/student ratio, early learning standards, support for students with special needs, effective curriculum, Pre-K assessment and high-quality teaching) and therefore are a good model on which to base expansion. However, with a few exceptions, public Pre-K is currently only a half school day (2.5-3 hours), while research shows that children benefit much more from a full school day (6.5 hours). Expanding targeted (public) Pre-K programs for low-income children (e.g., converting half-day to full school day programs) is associated with lower costs and higher economic returns. (OLO Report 7-7, Chapter 3-P. 21).

Additionally, if Pre-K slots are to be expanded, specific areas of the county should be considered. The report states “4 year olds are concentrated in three of the county’s 13 districts: Silver Spring and Wheaton-Glenmont, Gaithersburg and Montgomery Village and Burtonsville and White Oak. 60% of the county’s 4 year olds reside in these three districts as well as 80% of four year olds eligible for FARMS. These data suggest that the three districts are in greatest need of high-quality Pre-K slots.” (OLO Report, p. 17).

## **COMMUNITY OUTREACH**

The FY 18 budget includes funding for assessing how to make the complicated move towards universal Pre-K to benefit all MC preschoolers and county leaders have begun discussions with residents about its impact and possible costs.

Councilmember Craig Rice and MCPS Superintendent Jack Smith hosted a county-wide meeting on universal Pre-K in August 2017 to get input from the community about what they are looking for in terms of early childhood education both in current programming and possible implementation of universal Pre-Kindergarten programs. At that meeting the superintendent said that he feels that enhancing early learning programs is even more critical now, and he would like to be able to serve every family who wants or needs it. He acknowledged that early learning happens throughout the 0-5 years, that a program for 4 year olds is not enough, but we need to be willing to create it in stages. He urged that the county get universal 4 year old Pre-K as a first step.

The superintendent also provided a snapshot of our Pre-K programs. As of late August, there were 103 MCPS Pre-K teachers, all with early childhood certification. The average class size is 20 and the adult to student ratio is 1:10. There were 2,953 students registered for 149 classes in 62 schools. Of those classes, 109 are Pre-K, 34 are Head Start and 6 are Pre-K +. The students come from 64 countries and speak 56 different languages; 54% are Hispanic/Latino; 32% are Black or African American; 7% are Asian; 5% are White; 2% are Native American. Most of the Head Start sites (24) have full school day programs; 7 have half-day programs. Most of the Pre-K sites (52) have half-day programs; 5 are full school day.

The superintendent also stressed that there is not room in the schools to accommodate much expansion of our Pre-K programs, so that any move toward universal Pre-K will definitely be based on a partnership with high-quality child care programs. He recognized that there are many families with incomes above the cutoff for our current public Pre-K program who cannot afford to pay for (or struggle to pay for) private high-quality child care/early education, and suggested that expansion of the cut off and/or assistance on a sliding scale will also need to be part of the community discussion.

Councilman Rice reported that the Maryland General Assembly authorized a commission (popularly known as the Kirwan Commission) to review the formulae used to distribute state education funds to local school systems, and a work group on Pre-K programs to report to that commission. The Kirwan Commission was at that time due to report out in December of 2017 and Councilman Rice anticipated that some state funding for expanding Pre-K programs would very likely to be an issue in the 2018 legislative session. The commission’s final report has been delayed, issue date t/b/d.

Montgomery Moving Forward (MMF), a consortium of county government, non-profit and business and professional leaders, has made early childhood education its second chief issue (its first is county workforce development, but its members have concluded that the county cannot move forward with that without first attempting to resolve the need for comprehensive, affordable and quality ECE for the future workforce). Known for its innovative approach to community problem solving, MMF’s Call to Action campaign (Acting Collectively for Equity in Early Care and Education) has been gathering statistics and professional advice that will help inform its analysis, findings and recommendations. Their final report should be available in time for December discussion groups.

This Fact Sheet was prepared by members of the Education Committee: Maxine Lewack (Chair), Judy Morenoff, Judy Whiton, Linda & Dave Anderson, Barbara Cronin, Carol Gross, Hedda Kenton and Connie Tonat.

**EARLY EDUCATION STUDY BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Montgomery County Early Care and Education Strategic Plan 2017

<https://mscca.org/wp-content/upload/2017/02/Strategic-Plan-2017.pdf>

OLO Report # 2017-7 Pre-K in Montgomery County & in Other Jurisdictions, 2/14/17

[http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OLO/Resources/Files/2017%20Reports/OLOReport2017\\_7PreKinMontgomeryCountyandinOtherJurisdictions.pdf](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OLO/Resources/Files/2017%20Reports/OLOReport2017_7PreKinMontgomeryCountyandinOtherJurisdictions.pdf)

Executive Summary of OLO Report: Universal Pre-K in Montgomery County Could Cost up to \$128 Million Annually, 2/15/17

Pre-Kindergarten & Head Start Programs, MCPS Fact Sheet (as of 8/23/17)

Montgomery Moving Forward (MMF) Fact Sheet on Early Childhood Education

Montgomery Moving Forward, Early Care and Education Landscape, September 2017

**CONSENSUS QUESTIONS**

1. Do you support these elements of our current position?

public funding for:

- home visiting (and other parent, education and early intervention programs)
- quality childcare and early education programs (such as Head Start, Judy Center, MCPS Pre-K and community based Pre-K, emphasizing full day, transportation and parent involvement)

Yes -      No -      Comments:

2. Should universal Pre-K be a goal in Montgomery County?

Yes -      No -      Comments:

3. If progress toward universal Pre-K were to be accomplished in stages which of the following would you support?

- a) Full-day Pre-K for 4 year olds currently eligible  
(the lowest percentage of whom are “ready for kindergarten”)
- b) Opening the eligibility for free half-day Pre-K to all four year olds
- c) Expanding Pre-K programs to 3 year olds for families currently eligible
- d) Full funding for the Working Parents Assistance Program to eliminate the waiting list and help lower income families afford before/after program care
- e) Increasing the eligible pool for free Pre-K by raising the income cut off
- f) Creating a sliding scale system to provide assistance to families above the cut-off who struggle to pay for high-quality care

Which of the above should be given a priority? (List no more than three priority items.)