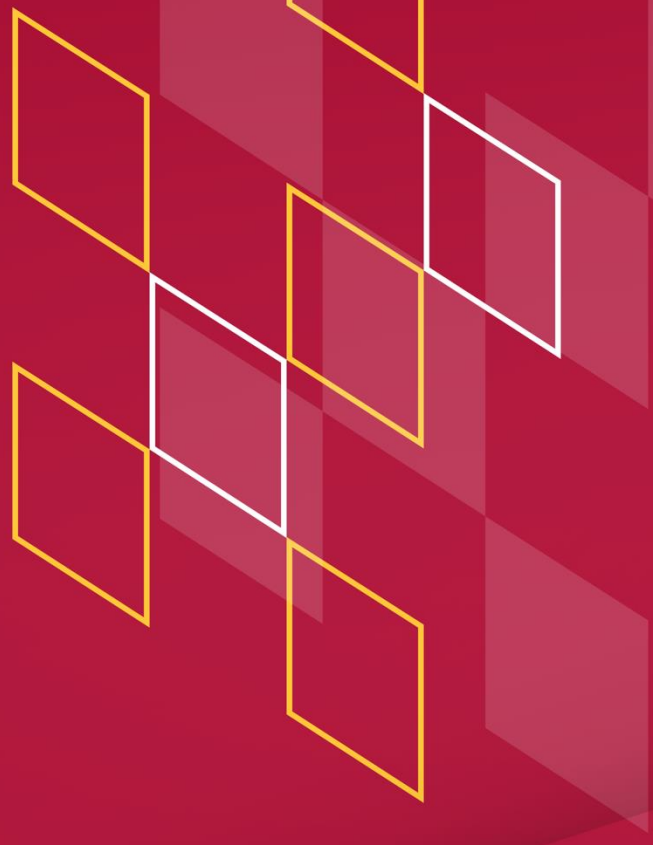




Mixed Delivery Publicly Funded Prekindergarten System Report

Division of Early Childhood

June 1, 2026



MARYLAND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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June 1, 2026

The Honorable Bill Ferguson
Senate President
H-107 State House
100 State Circle
Annapolis, MD 21401

The Honorable Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk
Speaker of the House
H-101 State House
100 State Circle
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: Mixed Delivery Publicly Funded Prekindergarten System Report (June 1, 2026)

Dear President Ferguson and Speaker Peña-Melnyk:

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) is required to convene a workgroup to conduct an analysis of the State's mixed delivery, publicly funded prekindergarten system established under Title 7, Subtitle 1A of the education Article. MSDE must then provide an interim report on the results of its analysis, including recommendations for changes to regulations, policies, and procedures to increase the efficacy of the publicly funded prekindergarten program and to make the program more equitable for providers and families. The interim report is required to be submitted to the General Assembly, in accordance with § 2–1257 of the State Government Article, by on or before June 1, 2026.

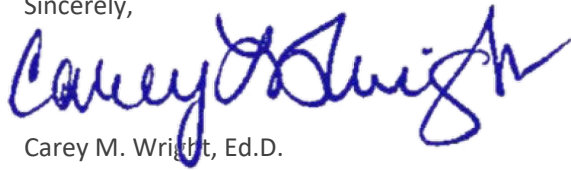
Please find attached the interim report. A final report, which includes the complete results of the analysis, any changes made by MSDE in response to the recommendations, and any additional recommendations from the workgroup related to changes to regulation, policies, procedures, or statute regarding the mixed delivery, publicly funded prekindergarten system, will be due on or before December 31, 2027.

If you have questions or need additional information, please contact Laurel Cratsley, Executive Director, Governmental Affairs, Education Policy, and External Relations by email at Laurel.cratsley@maryland.gov or by telephone at 443-571-5461.

June 1, 2026

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Carey M. Wright". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Carey" and last name "Wright" clearly distinguishable.

Carey M. Wright, Ed.D.

State Superintendent of Schools

c: Sarah Albert, Mandated Reports Specialist, Department of Legislative Services (five copies)

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Executive Summary

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WORKGROUP

House Bill (HB) 1475, enacted during the 2025 Maryland General Assembly Session, directed the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the State's publicly funded mixed-delivery prekindergarten system established under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The legislation requires MSDE to convene the Prekindergarten Systems Analysis Workgroup (PKW), composed of representatives appointed by the President of the Senate, Speaker of the House, and State Superintendent, and charged with reviewing the implementation of Maryland's mixed-delivery Pre-K model. HB 1475 mandates an interim report, submitted to the State Board of Education (SBOE), Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB), and General Assembly by June 1, 2026. This report constitutes this initial interim report on the workgroup's activities to date.

METHODOLOGY

To organize its work, the PKW consolidated HB 1475's 14 statutory requirements into four content areas: (1) Application and Administration, (2) Child and Family Experiences, (3) Program Standards (Maryland EXCELS), and (4) Finance, Payments, and Partnerships. These categories guided meeting agendas, analysis, and the development of preliminary findings and recommendations.

The PKW met monthly for two-hour sessions, and input was intentionally gathered from public and community based/private providers (those participating and not participating in publicly funded Pre-K). "Community-based provider" and "private provider" are used interchangeably throughout this report and may refer to Head Start programs, family child care programs, or child care centers.

FINDINGS

Application and Administration

The PKW identified several challenges, including inconsistencies between state policies governing public and private Pre-K providers, especially regarding rest-time regulations, substitute teacher requirements, and interpretations of COMAR. Providers also reported significant administrative burden related to the Pre-K Expansion Grant, including late release of materials, overly complex application processes, limited language clarity, and insufficient feedback for unsuccessful applicants. Private providers described duplicative documentation requirements and limited support to maintain high-quality mixed-delivery classrooms. Staffing shortages, especially within Head Start programs, further strain the system.

Recommendations from the workgroup include 1) issuing clear, aligned guidance on rest-time policies, 2) requiring early-January release of Pre-K applications, 3) reducing administrative complexity and providing data support, 3) expanding translated materials and multilingual technical assistance, and 4) providing standardized feedback to unsuccessful applicants and tiered application pathways for returning providers.

Child and Family Experiences

Families continue to face several obstacles to accessing publicly funded Pre-K programs. These include limited transportation options, program hours that do not align with working families' schedules,

inadequate accommodations for children with disabilities, and inconsistent language access. Multilingual families—especially those in rural communities—often lack awareness of available Pre-K opportunities. Private providers report difficulties participating in the IEP process, which constrains placement options that limit parental choice. Additionally, safety concerns among newcomer families further deter enrollment.

The workgroup recommends designating children with disabilities and multilingual learners as automatic Tier 1 qualifiers to reduce obstacles to participation. It also proposes formally including private providers as members of IEP teams to expand placement opportunities. Strengthening cross-sector collaboration and training is essential, alongside standardizing multilingual outreach and increasing supports for educators working with multilingual families. Finally, the workgroup emphasizes the need to build systems that more effectively inform families about Pre-K availability and ensure program structures align with family needs.

Program Standards: Maryland EXCELS

The PKW identified several challenges related to the Maryland EXCELS system. Providers report difficulties meeting EXCELS standards due to resource limitations, time demands, and challenges navigating the online portal. Some home-based providers opt out of EXCELS entirely, citing obstacles unique to their operating context. Additionally, disciplinary actions, such as reductions in quality ratings, are inconsistently applied and lack transparent appeals processes. Finally, families often do not understand the meaning or purpose of quality ratings, reducing the system's effectiveness as a decision-making tool.

The PKW recommends creating coaching and mentorship cohorts to support providers in meeting EXCELS requirements. It further proposes implementing tiered consequences for violations to ensure penalties are proportional, as well as establishing alternative approaches for addressing infractions related to individual employees rather than the program as a whole. Strengthening and clarifying the appeals processes is also essential to promote transparency, fairness, and provider confidence in the system.

Finance, Payments, and Partnerships

The PKW identified several challenges, including delayed payments, complex invoicing requirements, and financial strain for providers, particularly for community-based providers operating on thin margins. Mixed-delivery collaboration also remains inconsistent across the state, limiting the system's ability to increase Pre-K access. Providers also expressed confusion about which Federal Poverty Level (FPL) should be used in applications.

Recommendations from the workgroup include improving reimbursement systems by evaluating forward-funding options, streamlining invoicing, and establishing predictable payment timelines. Expanding allowable uses of Blueprint funds to support family engagement activities—such as field trips, assemblies, and other enrichment opportunities—would further support program quality and family participation. The workgroup also recommends creating a partnership resource hub to share successful collaboration practices across public and private Pre-K settings.

NEXT STEPS

MSDE and PKW will continue analyzing outstanding statutory requirements and refine recommendations for the final report. Next steps include deeper regulatory reviews, additional data collection and expert consultation, synthesis of new findings, and assessment of the implications of proposed changes. The final report will present comprehensive, evidence-based recommendations to ensure fair access, operational sustainability, and high-quality early learning opportunities across Maryland's mixed-delivery Pre-K system.

Background

House Bill (HB) 1475 was introduced during the 2025 Maryland General Assembly Session and signed into law by Governor Wes Moore on May 6, 2025. The legislation directs the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to facilitate a workgroup that conducts a comprehensive analysis of the State's current mixed delivery publicly funded prekindergarten (Pre-K) system established under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future (Blueprint). As part of the analysis, MSDE was directed to establish a workgroup, Prekindergarten Systems Analysis Workgroup (PKW), consisting of members appointed by the President of the Senate, Speaker of the House, and State Superintendent of Schools.

The interim report on the results of the analysis fulfills the requirements by including recommendations for changes to regulations, policies, and procedures to increase the efficacy of the publicly funded Pre-K program. This interim report is due to the State Board of Education (SBOE), Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB), and Maryland General Assembly (MGA) on or before June 1, 2026.

The final report is due to AIB and MGA on or before December 31, 2027. The final report will address changes made by MSDE in response to recommendations of the interim report and any additional recommendations from the workgroup for changes to regulation, policies, procedures, or statute regarding the mixed delivery system.

HOUSE BILL 1475 BACKGROUND

HB 1475 was introduced during the 2025 Maryland legislative session to examine the State's existing publicly funded mixed delivery system. HB 1475 received exceptionally strong support throughout the 2025 legislative session, with testimony records showing broad, cross-sector backing and no organized opposition. Dozens of individuals and organizations submitted favorable testimony in both the House Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Education, Energy and Environment Committee. Interest holders across Maryland's early learning landscape supported the bill, including child care providers, early childhood advocacy groups, professional associations, unions, local school systems, community organizations, and individual educators. As a result, with no recorded opposition and robust engagement from various sectors, HB 1475 became law.

PUBLIC PREKINDERGARTEN IN MARYLAND

The Maryland Prekindergarten Program started in 2002, charging local boards of education to provide Pre-K in public schools for all 4-year-olds (from families with incomes at or below 185% Federal Poverty Line or FPL) by 2007. Maryland's public Pre-K supports eligible children in a half-day program through a school funding formula based on K-12 per pupil costs. In 2014, Maryland enacted the Prekindergarten Expansion Act, adding \$4.3 million per year to increase access to full-day public Pre-K for 4-year-olds (from families with household incomes up to 300% FPL). The Pre-K expansion grant is a competitive grant opportunity available to local education agencies (LEAs) as well as private and community providers. Prekindergarten programs funded through the expansion grant are monitored annually, required to participate in Maryland's Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) - Maryland EXCELS, and provided with targeted technical assistance.

Foundational to Maryland's Prekindergarten program is the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, passed in 2021 with an emphasis in Pillar One on strengthening early education opportunities that prepare all children for school and success. Specifically, the Blueprint expanded full-day Pre-K at no cost for four- and three-year-olds from families with incomes up to 300% of the FPL and for four-year-olds from families between 300% and 600% FPL using a sliding scale. The Blueprint also expanded Judy Center Early Learning Hubs and Patty Center Family Support Programs to support early learning opportunities and family support.

Approach

A central requirement of HB 1475 is the establishment of the Pre-K Systems Analysis Workgroup (PKW). MSDE is responsible for convening and supporting this group, which brings together multiple interest holders to assess the effectiveness, challenges, and opportunities within Maryland's Pre-K landscape.

HB 1475 provides a mandate for MSDE and key partners across the state to assess how Maryland's Pre-K system is functioning across all settings, including private, community-based, and school-based care settings. The legislation ensures that:

- Providers' experiences and challenges are formally examined across settings
- Access and quality remain central to policy decisions.
- The state has a roadmap for improving implementation of the Blueprint's Pre-K expansion.
- Recommendations for changes to Maryland's Pre-K systems are grounded in interest holder input and statewide analysis.

To support a clear and organized analysis of HB 1475, the workgroup consolidated the law's fourteen requirements into a set of four primary topics that guided the group's work:

1. Application and Administration
2. Child and Family Experiences
3. Program Standards: Maryland EXCELS
4. Finance, Payments, and Partnerships

These topics served as an initial framework for understanding the bill's scope and were explored in depth across multiple meetings, each focused on unpacking the requirements, implications, and operational realities within that area.

This structure provided a practical foundation for building shared understanding among members and ensuring that discussions remained focused, comprehensive, and aligned with the bill's intent. By approaching the work in this way, the group strengthened its collective commitment to meeting all statutory requirements and laid the groundwork for thoughtful, well-informed recommendations moving forward.

WORKGROUP MEMBER APPOINTMENTS

Guided by the legislation's requirements for member selection, the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) at MSDE ensured that the PKW includes voices from across Maryland's early learning landscape, public schools, private providers, family child care, advocacy organizations, higher education, and community partners. DEC reviewed all submitted applications using a structured set of criteria, such as professional role, geographic distribution, lived experience, and expertise in serving children with disabilities and multilingual learners. By intentionally assembling a balanced membership, DEC created the conditions for meaningful collaboration, shared understanding, and thoughtful analysis. A full list of participating members and their affiliations is included in Appendix A.

MEETING CADENCE AND APPROACH

Since its establishment in September 2026, PKW members have met monthly for two hours to discuss the fundamental issues cited in HB 1475 (please see Appendix B for the session details of each meeting). To maximize engagement and participation, the PKW is structured in a discussion-oriented format and utilizes:

- Full group discussions
- Small-group breakout sessions by topic
- Written feedback, shared documents, and preparation work
- One-on-one meetings with MSDE leaders
- Presentations from MSDE staff and subject-matter experts

Input was solicited from public Pre-K providers, private and community-based providers, and providers who have chosen not to participate in publicly-funded Pre-K. Selected quotes from various interest holders are presented in Appendix C. At each workgroup meeting, the goals and purpose of the workgroup were reviewed alongside the roles and responsibilities of members. PKW members reviewed specific content areas ranging from the broader Maryland Pre-K landscape to specific programs and policies such as Maryland EXCELS. Notes were taken at each workgroup meeting to record insights, challenges, concerns, and proposed solutions.

HB 1475 WORKGROUP STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS AND TOPIC ALIGNMENT

As mentioned above, the workgroup analyses focus on four main topics to guide members' discussion and support the creation of recommendations attached to each area of focus. For each of the four topic areas, we identified and aligned the corresponding statutory requirements to clearly showcase how our discussions and analyses directly addressed the 14 mandates of HB 1475 (listed below).

Furthermore, members of PKW began work on each designated review area that is presented in Tables 1 – 4. While substantial progress has been made across most topics, several areas remain only partially examined due to the scope and complexity of the issues under review. Upon PKW members' agreement and approval, these "partially examined" items will be analyzed as the PKW moves into the next phase of its work.

Tables 1 – 4 below provide a short summary of the progress to date, indicating which topics have been addressed and which topics remain outstanding.

Table 1. Application and Administration

Statutory Requirement	Progress	Next Steps
(1) Any discrepancies between state policies that regulate private and public prekindergarten providers, including differences in policies for rests or nap time, substitute teachers, and the day-to-day governance of prekindergarten providers identified by the workgroup.	Topics partially examined, see the outstanding topics in the relevant section	PKW will invite licensing team to the group conversation and dive deep into the rest/nap time and substitute teacher policies.
(2) The implementation of the requirements for publicly funded prekindergarten programs under Chapter 165 of the Acts of the General Assembly of 2024	Topics partially examined, see the outstanding topics in the relevant section	PKW will continue to examine this topic to improve recommendations.
(6) The feasibility of changing the Prekindergarten Expansion Grant Program guidelines after grant agreements have been executed and whether there are appropriate changes that should be made to the guidelines	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	Implement Recommendations
(8) The administrative processes that a private prekindergarten provider must undertake in order to participate in publicly funded prekindergarten and whether the processes could be streamlined or reduced	Topics partially examined, see the outstanding topics in the relevant section	PKW will continue to examine this topic to improve recommendations.
(10) The languages in which grant applications, agreements, guidelines, technical support, training, and professional development are offered and whether the languages offered align with those spoken by potential private prekindergarten providers	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	Implement Recommendations

Table 2. Child and Family Experiences

Statutory Requirement	Progress	Next Step
(5) Whether the timeline for the operation of a prekindergarten educational program required by the Prekindergarten Expansion Grant Program under § 7–101.2(c)(1)(iii) of the Education Article matches the typical needs of prekindergarten students and parents	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	Implement Recommendations
(11) The languages in which materials provided to parents of children enrolled with a private prekindergarten provider are offered and whether the languages offered align with those spoken by the parents	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	Implement Recommendations
(14.ii*) How best to use publicly funded prekindergarten to provide a quality early childhood education for students with and without disabilities together in the same classrooms *also captured under Program Standards	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	PKW will continue to examine transportation concerns and services specific to children with disabilities.

Table 3. Program Standards: Maryland EXCELS

Statutory Requirement	Progress	Next Step
7) The process through which quality rating levels in the Maryland EXCELS Program are changed, including: (i) disciplining a prekindergarten provider for an infraction by lowering the quality rating level; (ii) whether, when using a reduction of a prekindergarten provider's quality rating as a disciplinary measure, the reduction is commensurate with the severity of the infraction; (iii) the process for appealing a change in a prekindergarten provider's quality rating; (iv) the feasibility of making standardized changes in the quality rating level; and	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	PKW will continue to examine the disciplinary policies that lower quality ratings as well as appeals processes.

Statutory Requirement	Progress	Next Step
(v) whether there are alternative methods available to address infractions, including methods to deal with infractions caused by a single employee		
(14.ii) How best to use publicly funded prekindergarten to provide a quality early childhood education for students with and without disabilities together in the same classrooms, including by developing methods to best improve teacher and staff training and recruitment to address the needs of students with and without disabilities	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	Implement Recommendations

Table 4. Finance, Payments, and Partnerships

Statutory Requirement	Progress	Next Step
(3) The method by which private prekindergarten providers are reimbursed and whether a method of payment through forward funding would be a feasible alternative	Topics partially examined, see the outstanding topics in the relevant section	PKW will continue to examine reimbursement methods to improve recommendations.
(4) Inefficiencies in the invoicing process for private prekindergarten providers and delays in private provider payments	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	Implement Recommendations
(12) Opportunities to pool resources among private prekindergarten providers, including employee benefits, creating a centralized substitute teacher pool, and other benefits that might come from economies of scale	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	PKW will continue to examine resources to improve recommendations.
(13) challenges for public prekindergarten providers in building or adapting facilities to accommodate prekindergarten students	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	PKW will continue to examine challenges to adapting facilities and invite licensing team to their conversation.

Statutory Requirement	Progress	Next Step
(14.i) How best to use publicly funded prekindergarten to provide a quality early childhood education for students with and without disabilities together in the same classrooms, including by developing methods to best combine federal, State, and local funding sources available for children in a publicly funded prekindergarten context to maximize support for all children	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	PKW will continue to work on ideas about how to streamline the funding to improve systems.
(14.iii) How best to use publicly funded prekindergarten to provide a quality early childhood education for students with and without disabilities together in the same classrooms, including by developing methods to best foster collaboration between public and private prekindergarten providers in delivering specialized transportation and services for students with disabilities.	Analysis in progress, Topics Discussed	PKW will continue to examine transportation concerns and services specific to children with disabilities.

This report reflects the workgroup's analysis of statutory requirements, outlines MSDE's approach to conducting the analysis implementation challenges, and operational realities affecting public school-based and community-based Pre-K providers. The report highlights administrative challenges and policy misalignment, while recognizing meaningful improvements implemented by MSDE. It presents actionable recommendations to improve strategies, efficiency, transparency, and sustainability for providers, children, and families.

Preliminary Findings and Recommendations

This section of the interim report provides a comprehensive summary of the key findings that emerged from PKW sessions, divided into four main topic areas. Each topic outlines the primary areas of focus, highlights the challenges identified by members, and reports the progress made to date. In addition, this section presents proposed solutions informed by interest holder feedback and subject matter expertise. Taken together, these components offer a clear view of the work completed thus far and the considerations that will guide the next phase of the analysis.

1. Application and Administration

Application and administration topics were discussed at six workgroup meetings between September 2025 and March 2026. The Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and State Board of Education members presented updates on the State's Pre-K Expansion Grant application, highlighting progress made through a human-centered design approach. Multiple methods were used to solicit input from PKW members across meetings, including large group discussions, breakout groups, and surveys/feedback forms. This section summarizes that input, particularly focusing on identifying challenges and proposing solutions.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

Challenges identified related to application and administration relate to aspects of policy alignment for rest time, the Pre-K expansion grant process, and administrative burden for private provider participation. Specifically, these are the challenges raised by the workgroup members:

- **Rest Time Policy Alignment:** There is a discrepancy in the interpretation and implementation of rest time requirements under COMAR and public Pre-K among public and private providers. Given that programs may have a mix of children funded through public or private funds, these differences have created confusion and even financial strain.
- **Pre-K Expansion Grant Process:**
 - Pre-Application: Later release of grant application materials for community-based providers compared to LEAs has created unfair enrollment and staffing conditions due to differences in funding structures. Additionally, inconsistencies in the content and timing of the release of the Grant Information Guide (GIG) created uncertainties.
 - Application: The application process is highly complex and resource-intensive, presenting issues (e.g., incompatibility with Word) for providers without access to grant-writing support. Additionally, written materials remain predominantly English-based and highly technical. As a result, multilingual providers often require additional time and outside support to complete the application accurately.
 - Post-Application: There is limited clarity regarding scoring thresholds, provisional awards, and feedback for unsuccessful applicants, which creates uncertainty in the grant process.
- **Administrative Burden for Private Providers:** Excessive administrative burden exists specifically for private providers to participate in publicly funded Pre-K, such as duplicative documentation.
- **Quality Support:** Community-based programs need additional support to maintain high quality within the mixed-delivery model.
- **Staffing Shortages:** Head Start programs, especially on the Eastern Shore, are facing staffing shortages that threaten their ability to remain open.

ACTIONS TAKEN TO DATE

While analyses of challenges and recommendations are ongoing, some actions have already been taken to address the challenges outlined above. These actions include:

- **Pre-K Expansion Grant Process:**

- Pre-Application: The 2026 Pre-K Expansion Grant application was released earlier in the current cycle (January 16, 2026), increasing alignment with Local Education Agency (LEA) planning timelines. In addition, the GIG was released in tandem with the application, improving clarity and preparation time.
- Application Content: Improvements were made to the structure of the application (including a compatible Word document accompanying the Qualtrics platform), which improved usability and reduced technical issues. Technical assistance sessions were also offered for multilingual providers.
- Post-Application: The introduction of provisional awards provided corrective opportunities for applicants. The full grant application required a minimum score of 80, and for those applicants who scored between 74 – 79 points, MSDE gave them a chance to revise and resubmit their application.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Several specific solutions were identified by the workgroup to address the challenges outlined above. These suggestions include:

Topic		Recommendations
Rest Time Policy Alignment		• Issue formal written guidance (i.e. operations manual) that aligns publicly funded Pre-K requirements with COMAR child care regulations regarding developmentally appropriate rest periods • Eliminate financial penalties associated with rest implementation and enforce consistent interpretation across providers • Ensure grant monitor training to prevent additional hours from being added for rest time at the program's expense
Pre-K Expansion Grant Process	Pre-Application	• Establish a policy requiring the release of the publicly funded Pre-K application within the first two weeks of January to ensure provider timelines are aligned with preparation time • Conduct an internal alignment review prior to publication to ensure credentialing and eligibility consistency, and provide a clear revision history when changes are made • Design a separate application for community-based providers given they are less resourced to complete the application
	Application	• Conduct a formal review of application complexity to identify unnecessary administrative burden • Provide data references to reduce independent research requirements • Explore tiered application pathways for returning high-performing providers • Provide translated written materials beginning with Spanish-language versions of the GIG and application overview

Topic		Recommendations
		• Offer bilingual technical assistance sessions with extended time formats • Develop a glossary of commonly used grant terminology
	Post-Application	• Publish scoring rubrics with clear weight distribution • Clearly define provisional award thresholds and corrective timelines • Provide standardized written feedback to unsuccessful applicants

OUTSTANDING ELEMENTS FOR FUTURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

The following topics were either partially examined by the workgroup or not yet discussed, and they will be examined in subsequent workgroup meetings. Any additional challenges or recommendations related to these topics will be addressed in the final report.

- Differences in policies for rest time
- Differences in policies for substitute teachers
- Streamlining the process that a private provider must undertake to participate in publicly funded Pre-K

2. Child and Family Experiences

Child and family experiences topics were discussed at three workgroup meetings in October, November of 2025, and January 2026. Multiple methods were used to solicit input from PKW members across meetings, including large group discussions, breakout groups, and surveys/feedback forms. This section summarizes that input, particularly focusing on identifying challenges and proposing solutions. Child and family experiences sessions were designed to intentionally elevate the perspectives of children with disabilities and multilingual learners. Through three sessions, the PKW focused on centering the lived experiences of children and families and co-created the solutions that reflect comprehensive practices.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

Challenges identified related to child and family experiences relate to transportation, hours of operation, accommodations for children with disabilities, language access, safety, and awareness. Specifically, these are the challenges raised by the workgroup members:

- **Transportation:** Most community providers are open longer hours and offer before and after school and sibling care but do not offer transportation to and from school.
- **Hours of Operation:** Because most families work longer than 6.5 hours per day, the hours of operation within public schools can be challenging for many families. In addition, when before and after school care is provided, it is not always appropriate for three- and four-year-olds.
- **Children with Disabilities:** Without additional funding, some programs may not be able to provide accommodation for children with disabilities. Additionally, private providers are often not included in IEP teams and struggle to get collaboration and services, limiting parent choice in mixed delivery.
- **Language Access:** Some multilingual families (especially in rural areas) are not aware Pre-K programs exist or do not fully understand the requirements needed for their child to participate in publicly funded Pre-K, all of which may prevent eligible families from enrolling.
- **Safety:** Some families are deterred from programs due to fear of immigration and law enforcement.
- **Child Enrollment Processes:** Enrollment can be complex and include challenges that delay access for eligible families.

ACTIONS TAKEN TO DATE

While analyses of challenges and recommendations are ongoing, some actions have already been taken to address the challenges outlined above. These actions include:

- MSDE had increased the number of slots in non-LEA Pre-K expansion programs to support parental choice. LEAs cannot expand beyond their existing capacity; therefore, this shift inherently creates additional slots for community-based providers to get awarded for.
- House Bill 1321 (2026) restructures the Child Care Scholarship (CCS) Program's enrollment system to better support families and increase access, including prohibiting enrollment freezes for specific populations. MSDE is also developing a centralized enrollment portal to support more streamlined child enrollment processes, including connecting families to open slots.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Several specific solutions were identified by the workgroup to address the challenges outlined above. These suggestions include:

Topic	Recommendations
Children with Disabilities	• Including children with extended Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP) • Make children with disabilities an automatic qualifier for Tier 1 • Strengthen partnerships by ensuring private providers are included in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams • Support blended funding strategies to support coordinated services • Encourage cross-sector collaboration, including collaboration between community-based providers and LEAs, by expanding training and staffing supports
Language Access	• Standardize multilingual outreach practices by requiring agencies to produce all user-friendly materials (e.g., translated flyers, multilingual hotlines) and maintain visible presence at centers • Provide educators with structured support for communicating with multilingual families • Make multilingual learners an automatic qualifier for Tier 1
Child Enrollment Processes	• Build the systems to better inform parents about Pre-K expansion and align it with their needs (e.g., conduct needs assessment to learn more about what they need)

OUTSTANDING ELEMENTS FOR FUTURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

The following topics were either partially examined by the workgroup or not yet discussed, and they will be examined in subsequent workgroup meetings. Any additional challenges or recommendations related to these topics will be addressed in the final report.

- Streamlining or reducing the administrative processes for enrolling a child in publicly funded Pre-K
- Developing methods to best foster collaboration between public and private Pre-K sectors in delivering specialized transportation and services for students with disabilities
- Languages in which the materials are provided to parents

3. Program Standards: EXCELS

Program standards (EXCELS) topics were discussed at two workgroup meetings between January and March of 2026. During the January meeting, MSDE's branch chief of the program standards presented the overview of Maryland EXCELS and answered any questions the members had about the program. This open forum format allowed members to directly ask questions and provide feedback on the program standards in Maryland. Members of the PKW also had multiple opportunities (e.g., large and small group discussions, filling out feedback forms) to identify challenges and propose solutions across several meetings.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

Challenges identified related to program standards relate to EXCELS disciplinary processes, communication, demands, and the portal. Specifically, the following challenges were raised by the workgroup:

- **EXCELS requirements:** There are challenges with achieving and advancing through the standards related to resources such as funding and time. In addition, some home providers choose not to participate in EXCELS due to their unique barriers and demands. The portal can also be challenging to navigate for providers. Lastly, programs standards might become an issue when local education agencies (LEAs) intend to add new classrooms
- **Disciplinary Processes:** Involuntary reductions in quality levels are very challenging to navigate. Disciplinary practices are also inconsistently applied to private versus LEA providers. In addition, it is unclear if there is an appeals process in place, and if so, how it works
- **Communication and Family Engagement:** There is a lack of communication on flexibilities to address the needs of children with disabilities (within the standards). In addition, many parents do not necessarily know what quality ratings or program standards are

ACTIONS TAKEN TO DATE

While analyses of challenges and recommendations are ongoing, some actions have already been taken to address the challenges outlined above. These actions include:

- MSDE's Preschool Development Grant is being used to improve Program Standards and Quality by expanding classroom assessments as well as the EXCELS Find a Program tool toward a more unified early childhood system with high standards met across programs.
- The revision to Maryland EXCELS standards will increase the alignment with accreditation to at least 85%, expanding the current pathway so that once accreditation is complete, programs can more easily maintain their EXCELS rating (provided their accreditation remains up to date).

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Several specific solutions were identified by the workgroup to address the challenges outlined above. These suggestions include:

Topic	Recommendations
EXCELS Requirements	• Create a cohort of programs that adapt coaching or mentoring models to support providers
Disciplinary Processes* *These recommendations will be elaborated with specific actions once PKW dives into the topics more in depth.	• Implement a tiered system for violations with different levels of consequences for different violations • Ensure proportionality of penalties • Explore alternatives when infractions stem from individual employees • Strengthen appeal processes

OUTSTANDING ELEMENTS FOR FUTURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

The following topics were either partially examined by the workgroup or not yet discussed, and they will be examined in subsequent workgroup meetings. Any additional challenges or recommendations related to these topics will be addressed in the final report.

- Disciplinary Processes: Lowering Ratings, appealing a change in quality rating, alternative ways to handle infractions.

4. Finance, Payments, and Partnerships

Payments and partnership topics were discussed at two workgroup meetings in February and March of 2026. During the February meeting, the PKW invited DEC's director of finance to the session. PKW members asked questions about the reimbursement models, delays in payments, and alternative ways to improve the payment system. Multiple methods were used to solicit input from PKW members across meetings, including large group discussions, breakout groups, and surveys/feedback forms. This section summarizes that input, particularly focusing on identifying challenges and proposing solutions.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

Challenges identified related to payments and partnership relate to invoicing and financial burdens for private providers. Specifically, the following challenges were raised by the workgroup:

- **Payments and invoicing:** Private providers experience delayed payments and complex invoicing requirements, which can lead to salary disruptions. These issues disproportionately impact small businesses that have little financial reserves.
- **Financial strain:** It is difficult to balance expenses, especially when working toward higher quality (e.g., compensating top-tier teachers), in particular for private providers who work under a reimbursement model with many out-of-pocket expenses.
- **Lack of partnership:** The disconnect between LEAs and community-based providers limit the ability to create consistent collaboration, driving instability rather than expanding access to Pre-K seats.
- **Lack of clarity:** Providers were confused whether to use the current year's or the previous years' Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPL) while submitting their application.

ACTIONS TAKEN TO DATE

While analyses of challenges and recommendations are ongoing, some actions have already been taken to address the challenges outlined above. These actions include:

- MSDE increased the upfront reimbursement from 15% to 20%
- MSDE's Preschool Development Grant is being used to streamline the process of monitoring and compliance by conducting an analysis of all monitoring tools used by DEC branches with the intention of aligning financial monitoring processes.
- Some partnerships are already in place between LEAs, community organizations, local departments and offices (e.g., health, fire), and private providers to expand access to Pre-K and support program quality.
- For this year's Prekindergarten expansion grant and Blueprint funded slots, MSDE is using the 2026 FPL guidelines to determine enrollment and family share.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Several specific solutions were identified by the workgroup to address the challenges outlined above. These suggestions include:

Topic	Recommendations
Payments and Invoicing	• Improve reimbursement systems by evaluating forward funding options, streamlining invoicing, and establishing predictable payment timelines
Use of Funds and Partnerships	• Support family engagement and partnerships by allowing Blueprint funds to be used for programs with family engagement activities, field trips, and assemblies • Create a resource hub with the existing successful partnerships between public and private settings, including organizations, local departments, and offices

OUTSTANDING ELEMENTS FOR FUTURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

The following topics were either partially examined by the workgroup or not yet discussed, and they will be examined in subsequent workgroup meetings. Any additional challenges or recommendations related to these topics will be addressed in the final report.

- Streamlining funding: Methods to combine federal, state, and local funding sources
- Building or adapting facilities to accommodate Pre-K students
- Opportunities to pull resources among private Pre-K providers, including employee benefits, creating a centralized substitute teacher pool, and other benefits that might come from economies of scale
- Reimbursement methods

Conclusion

The workgroup's review of Maryland's Pre-K systems identified both challenges and meaningful improvements that continue to impact the effectiveness of the mixed-delivery system. While recent improvements such as the early release of the grant application, improved alignment with GIG, and increased responsiveness from MSDE represent important progress, the discrepancies in how public and private providers operate continue to create problems which impede providers' ability to participate in the State's publicly funded mixed-delivery system.

The findings highlight the need for continued improvements to ensure a more accountable and stable system. Addressing administrative burdens, enhancing language for all users, aligning regulatory requirements, improving reimbursement systems, and strengthening partnerships (especially for children with disabilities and multilingual learners) will be essential to advancing Maryland's mixed-delivery pre-K system.

The workgroup affirms MSDE's commitment to a strong mixed delivery pre-K system and emphasizes that transparency and sustainability must guide continued implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The recommendations in this interim report aim to support removing obstacles, support provider viability, and ensure high-quality early learning experiences for all children and families.

Next Steps

On or before December 1, 2027, MSDE will submit a final report with the complete results of the regulatory analyses conducted in fulfillment of requirements under HB 1475. The PKW, in coordination with MSDE, will continue working on systematic analysis and completing the outstanding topics identified in this interim report.

The PKW will address all outstanding topics through a structured process that prioritizes topics, collects any additional data or expert input (e.g., licensing team), and engages interest holders to refine understanding of remaining areas needed to complete the analysis. This work will include:

- Completing any additional regulatory reviews,
- Synthesizing new findings with previously completed analysis,
- Continuing to draft recommendations regarding specific areas of focus, and
- Identifying the implications of the suggestions PKW will make.

The results of these efforts will inform the development of clear, evidence-based recommendations which will be incorporated into the final report.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Division of Early Childhood (DEC) at MSDE wish to acknowledge the seven members of the Interim Report Subcommittee: Jana Boddy, Lisa Buchy, Ruby Daniels, Rossana Espinoza-Thorndahl, Danielle Frisby, Bill Hudson, and Chris Peusch, for their contributions to the preparation of this interim report. Their diligent review of meeting artifacts, informed perspectives, and thoughtful recommendations have significantly enhanced the rigor and coherence of this interim report.

Appendices

Appendix A. The list of workgroup members and their affiliations

Required Member	Status	Name	Affiliation
Member of the Senate of Maryland (appointed by the President of the Senate)	Required – Vacant*		
Member of the House of Delegates (appointed by Speaker of the House)	Required - Appointed	Delegate Greg Wims	District 39, Ways and Means Committee
MSDE (appointed by State Superintendent of Schools)	Required - Appointed	Jena Smith Dr. Nykia Washington	MSDE
Department of Health (appointed by State Superintendent of Schools)	Required – Appointed	Martine Gordon	Maryland Department of Health (MDH)
Head Start Program (appointed by State Superintendent of Schools)	Required - Appointed	Erica Knox	Head Start – Catholic Charities, INC
Office of the State Fire Marshal (appointed by State Superintendent of Schools)	Required – Vacant*		
Child care advocacy organization (appointed by State Superintendent of Schools)	Required - Appointed	Jana Boddy	Maryland Association for the Education of Young Children
Child care advocacy organization (appointed by State Superintendent of Schools)	Required - Appointed	Alexandra Tyson	Siyana Partners Consulting
Child care advocacy organization (appointed by State Superintendent of Schools)	Appointed	Bill Hudson	Family Child Care Alliance of Maryland
Child care advocacy organization (appointed by State Superintendent of Schools)	Appointed	Christina Peusch	Maryland State Child Care Association

Required Member	Status	Name	Affiliation
Child care advocacy organization (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Appointed	Ruby Daniels	Maryland State Family Child Care Association
Community college with an ECE program (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Required - Appointed	Sarah Ross	Chesapeake College
Family child care provider (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Required - Appointed	Rossana Espinoza-Thorndahl	Latino Child Care Association of Maryland
Family child care provider (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Required - Appointed	Jenn Nicholls	Journey Preschool
Family child care provider (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Appointed	Anny Gonzalez	Somos Early Learning Center
Provider from child care center (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Required - Appointed	Hilary Roberts-King	Downtown Baltimore Child Care
Provider from child care center (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Required - Appointed	Doreen Engel	The ARC Montgomery County
Provider from child care center (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Appointed	Caitlyn Holley	Goddard Schools, Owing Mills
Special Education (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Appointed	Nancy Gregory	Calvert County Public Schools
Special Education (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Appointed	Marcella E. Franczkowski	Kennedy Krieger Institute

Required Member	Status	Name	Affiliation
Pre-K in a Local Education Agency (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Appointed	Amy Walstrum	Talbot County School Public Schools
Pre-K in a Local Education Agency (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Appointed	Christina Welch	Worcester County Public Schools
Pre-K in a Local Education Agency (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Appointed	Nancy Gregory	Calvert County Public Schools
University with an ECE Program (<i>appointed by State Superintendent of Schools</i>)	Appointed	Lisa Buchy	Towson University

*PKW will undertake efforts to address and resolve all existing vacancies.

Appendix B. Meeting schedule and topics

Session Date	Topic and Session Details
September 15, 2025	Kick-off meeting Roles, Norms, and Workgroup Responsibilities National and State's Pre-K Landscape
October 16, 2025	HB 1475 Review and Topics Identification Application and Administration: Improvements on the Pre-K Expansion Grant Application via Human-Centered Design, Hannah Oakley, Deputy Director, State Board of Education Child and Family Experiences: Priority Populations (Multilingual learners, and children with disabilities), Family Child Care, Center-based Care, Local Education Agencies
November 20, 2025	Application and Administration: Pre-K Expansion Grant Application Improvements Review Child and Family Experiences: Developing Recommendations for Priority Populations (Multilingual learners, and children with disabilities), Family Child Care, Center-based Care, Local Education Agencies
December 2025	One-on-one meetings with MSDE PKW leaders
January 15, 2026	Program Standards: Maryland EXCELS, Jena Smith, Director of Quality Improvement Initiatives Diving into Program Standards: Challenges and Solutions Interim Report Call-out: Gathering Volunteer Team
February 19, 2026	Finance, Payments, and Partnerships, Jeffrey Eley, Director of Finance Building Strong Partnerships and Financial Foundations: Proposed Solutions to Challenges Interim Report Volunteer Team Meeting
March 26, 2026	Overview of Pre-K Systems Analysis Workgroup's Progress: Identifying Gaps and Sharing Ideas for Policy Improvements

Session Date	Topic and Session Details
	Identifying Achievements and Outstanding Topics Building Consensus on the Interim Report and Updates from the Interim Report Volunteer Team
April 19, 2026	Reviewing the Interim Report and Soliciting Feedback

Appendix C. Interest holder perspectives (selected quotes)**Early Childhood Providers**

“Providers want to expand access, but sustainable funding and a qualified workforce are essential for maintaining program quality.”

Families and Caregivers

“Families consistently emphasized the importance of affordable, high-quality prekindergarten options that align with working schedules.”

Local Education Agencies

“School systems see strong alignment between early learning investments and later academic success, but need clear guidance and stable funding to scale programs.”

Workforce and Early Educators

“Early educators expressed concern about compensation and professional development opportunities, noting these as critical to recruitment and retention.”

Advocacy and Policy Organizations

“Interest holders urged the State to treat prekindergarten as a foundational component of the education continuum rather than a discretionary service.”

Appendix D. Statutory requirements matrix

Statutory Citation / Section	Requirement	Responsible Entity	Status / Workgroup Response	Notes / Implementation Considerations
HB 1475 §1(a)	Establish a statewide Prekindergarten Workgroup	State Department of Education	Completed	Workgroup convened with representatives from education, early childhood providers, and state agencies
HB 1475 §1(b)(1)	Assess current availability and access to prekindergarten services	Prekindergarten Workgroup	In Progress	Review includes geographic, demographic, and program-type variation
HB 1475 §1(b)(2)	Evaluate quality standards across public and private prekindergarten programs	Prekindergarten Workgroup	In Progress	Alignment with existing early learning standards under review
HB 1475 §1(b)(3)	Identify challenges to participation for families and providers	Prekindergarten Workgroup	In Progress	Challenges discussed include workforce capacity, funding stability, and transportation
HB 1475 §1(c)	Solicit interest holder input, including families and providers	Prekindergarten Workgroup	Completed	Input gathered through meetings, written submissions, and listening sessions
HB 1475 §1(d)	Develop recommendations to expand access and improve quality	Prekindergarten Workgroup	In Progress	Recommendations will address funding, governance, and phased implementation
HB 1475 §2	Submit final report to the Governor and General Assembly by statutory deadline	Prekindergarten Workgroup	In Progress	Draft report under development