

PROJECT SUMMARY/ABSTRACT

Project Title: The Next Step: Improving Program Quality and Child Outcomes in Maryland

Applicant Name: Steven Hicks, Assistant State Superintendent, Division of Early Childhood (DEC), Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE)

Address: 200 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, MD 21201

Contact Phone Number: (410) 767-0342 **E-Mail Address:** Steven.Hicks@Maryland.gov

Web Site Address: <https://earlychildhood.marylandpublicschools.org/>

In January 2018, Maryland's highly influential *Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education* highlighted the need for the state to ensure that "all early childhood education programs, irrespective of whether they are provided by public agencies or private providers, are of high quality." Maryland has made significant progress toward this goal. Through the use of federal grants like *Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge* (RTT-ELC) and the former *Preschool Development Grants* (PDG) program, along with federal funding increases, the state has created a more coordinated, efficient, and impactful mixed-delivery system of high-quality early care and education (ECE) programs and services. Maryland has a consolidated governance structure within MSDE, which administers and coordinates a majority of the state's ECE programs, houses the Head Start State Collaboration Office, and oversees the state and regional early childhood advisory councils. The state has taken bold actions to double child care subsidy income eligibility levels and increase provider reimbursement rates to expand parent choice and child access to early learning; implemented stricter licensing standards to ensure greater child health and safety; created one of the country's strongest quality measurement and improvement systems to promote excellence and share best practices; and coordinated early childhood family engagement supports and services through a nationally recognized family engagement framework.

However, significant needs remain. Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) data indicate only 45 percent of Maryland kindergarteners demonstrate overall readiness for school. Equally troubling, school readiness gaps exist by income, race/ethnicity, English proficiency, disability status, and county. At the system level, the state struggles to meet the demand for highly effective teachers, while the early childhood data system is in significant need of modernization, as it neither facilitates data-driven decision-making nor has the capacity to assign unique identifiers to support an unduplicated count of children in the early childhood system.

To move the system forward, this grant application presents a plan to engage in a comprehensive needs assessment/strategic planning process that will produce recommendations by consolidating data already gathered through numerous needs assessment and strategic planning processes across the state, as well as engage stakeholders in identifying additional needs. The proposed grant activities build on the state's current early childhood infrastructure to maximize parental choice, share best practices, and improve program quality across all settings. While supporting all children in the state, the grant will have a specific focus on promoting equity for children who are vulnerable or underserved, including children from low-income families, with disabilities/developmental delays, who are dual language learners, and who live in rural areas. The grant will produce system improvements that promote the healthy bodies, healthy minds, and foundational knowledge and skills young children need to succeed in school. Such system improvements will also provide parents with the resources they need as their children's first and most important teacher.