Appendix Q
Preschool and Prekindergarten Expansion
Blueprint for Maryland’s Future

Preschool and Prekindergarten Expansion

Introduction

The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future, also known as the Blueprint, establishes in law the policies and accountability recommendations of the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education. The Bill, HB 1300, has five major policy areas for implementation: Early Childhood Education, High-Quality and Diverse Teachers and Leaders, College and Career Readiness (CCR) Pathways – including Career and Technical Education, More Resources to Ensure All Students are Successful, and Governance and Accountability.

Local Education Agencies (LEAs) will be required to offer free Preschool (PS) and Prekindergarten (PK) programs for households with income beneath 300-percent of the poverty line, an increase from the current guidelines of 185-percent. These full-day options that are required by the blueprint could be within the school system or within the community. This effort is being made to ensure that all students enter kindergarten ready to learn.

This impacts BCPS as currently the majority of the PS and PK programs offered are half-day sessions and are not in all of our buildings. An expansion of full-day prekindergarten will be explored by a prekindergarten expansion internal workgroup in BCPS. BCPS representatives are also participating in a multiagency group – Baltimore County’s Early Childhood Advisory Council – to develop a shared vision and collaborative multiyear strategic plan to ensure that necessary resources are leveraged to meet the needs of Baltimore County’s youngest learners and their families. In addition to full-day prekindergarten, are opportunities to expand Judy Centers and Family Support Centers through Blueprint.

Meeting this increased demand for PK seats will require a considerable dedication of resources in building space and staffing. Even just converting the existing half-day section requires doubling the number of rooms and staff as previously the half day sections could share one room and associated staff. In many schools, meeting this demand for all eligible students will often require four or five sections for both 3-year-old and 4-year-old students (total of eight to ten rooms) comparable to the number of sections of other grades at the school (and perhaps even more depending on appropriate class sizes for these young students).

Given the high utilization of schools throughout the system, few schools currently have adequate capacity in classrooms, core spaces like cafeterias, and special areas (e.g. music, art) to accommodate even a conversion of half-day to full-day PK expansion. Additionally, because of the educational specifications for early childhood programs, those schools that may have capacity do not always have spaces appropriate for program placement. Thus, providing full day early childhood programs systemwide will require significant capital investments in addition to thoughtful strategic planning over a long period of time.
Estimating Demand for Prekindergarten

Estimating the number of students eligible under the new guidelines, is key to developing a long-range strategic plan for expanding PS and PK. Like many other LEAs estimating the number of eligible students has presented some challenges. BCPS has contracted with Sage Policy Group, LLC (Sage) to estimate the pool of eligible PS and PK students. Traditional methods using birth-to-kindergarten ratios is insufficient, as additional adjustments are necessary, including adjustments based on family income.

Another key variable relates to how many families will enroll their children in early childhood programs, as PS and PK is not mandatory. Similarly, it is unknown whether more families will seek to enroll children in a full-day program as opposed to a half-day program. It is also unknown whether there will be any differences in the enrollment of PS and PK in full-day programming.

Sage and BCPS are still in the early stages of identifying the best methods to estimate these new variables. Historical data is the basis for projection methodology and several years of expanding full-day PS and PK access will be needed to have the data necessary to accurately project early childhood enrollment.

Meeting Demand for Prekindergarten Seats

Simultaneous with its efforts to more precisely understand the full demand to serve its youngest students, BCPS is strategically adding full-day PK sections. Expansion of full-day PK will first be focused on making full-day PK available for all four-year-olds from low-income families as half-day sections are converted into full-day sections. This conversion will maintain the current number of PK seats (e.g., if a school has two half-day sections, these will be converted to two full-day sections). This will occur at the same time as seats are expanded gradually for eligible three-year-old students. At this time, no State funding has been identified and implementation is dependent on the provision of such funding.

Short-term Expansion Plan

The BCPS PS and PK Expansion Workgroup began analyzing schools for expansion by identifying schools with the highest poverty rates that are currently underutilized for space and then evaluating the schools for deficits in the educational specifications of those schools. Based on this evaluation, BCPS will begin expanding access to full-day PreK programs at three schools for 2022-2023 school year by converting the current half-day programs at those schools to full-day. Associated staffing increases have been requested in the budget and spaces within the building that can meet the educational specifications for these programs have been identified.
Long-range Expansion Plan

BCPS is still in the process of developing a long-range strategy for expanding full-day PK throughout the system. From a facilities perspective, this involves identifying those schools with the highest number of eligible students, evaluating schools for the ability to accommodate these additional students and making plans, where necessary, for capital projects. Capital projects that are currently planned will provide the opportunity to provide full-day PK at those schools and adjacent schools if adequate building capacity is available following the boundary study and early childhood classrooms are available.

As mentioned above, as BCPS implements the recommendations of Blueprint and has some experience in the response to increased access to full-day programming, better data will be available to inform the development of more precise plans on how the system can best meet the needs of these students. This will help guide decisions relating to timing and location of this massive expansion of early childhood programming.

How private providers will be used

BCPS will offer eligible families the names of private providers who are opening up seats at no cost. Staff within the Office of Early Childhood programs work with private providers to obtain credentialling.