



Getting into the Black Box: How Do Low-Income Parents Make Choices about Early Care and Education in Maryland?

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Introduction to the Maryland Research Capacity Brief Series

The purpose of this Research Brief Series is to summarize key findings and implications from the Maryland Research Capacity study. This multi-method study included focus groups and the analysis of Maryland's child care subsidy administrative data on topics including: parents' priorities and preferences in making child care decisions, defining high quality care and school readiness, continuity in subsidized care arrangements, and the association between enrollment in subsidized care arrangements and assessments of children's school readiness upon kindergarten entry. The Maryland Research Capacity Brief Series is designed to answer questions of interest to state child care administrators, county agency staff and other early childhood stakeholders. The entire series of baseline briefs is available online at: www.mdmnresearchpartnership.com.

BACKGROUND

Existing literature highlights the positive influence of high-quality early care and education on the development of young children, and particularly young children in impoverished or low-income families.¹ Reflecting the promising influence of high-quality early care and education on children's developmental outcomes, policy makers and state administrators in Maryland are currently in the process of developing a statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), entitled Maryland EXCELS. This system has two primary purposes: 1) to improve the quality of care offered to children by formalizing a professional development system that rewards high-quality practices, and 2) to inform parents about the quality of care offered by providers. Maryland EXCELS will be modeled, in part, after those currently being implemented or piloted in 26 other states and counties.²

One key element to a successful QRIS is providing parents with information about the quality of providers as they are choosing an early care and education arrangement. In order to be effective, this information must be accessible, easily understood, and trustworthy to parents. Additionally, the information should be presented in a way that appeals to parents' desires and definitions of "high quality" and in a timeframe that is helpful to parents as they make decisions about the care of their child.

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

This research brief aims to provide information that can help shape the development of Maryland EXCELS through examination of low-income parents' experiences accessing and choosing among early care and education arrangements for their preschool-aged children.³ Drawing from qualitative data, this brief sheds light on parents' definitions of high-quality care, priorities in selecting

¹ Barnett, W.S. (1995). Long-term effects of early childhood programs on cognitive and school outcomes. *Future of Children*, 5(3), 25-50. Burchinal, M., Kainza, K., & Cai, Y. (2010). How well do our measures of quality predict child outcomes? In M. Zaslow, I. Martinez-Beck, K. Tout, & T. Halle (Eds.), *Quality Measurement in Early Childhood Settings* (pp. 11-32). Washington, DC: Brookes. Dearing, E., McCartney, K., & Taylor, B.A. (2009). Does higher quality early child care promote low-income children's math and reading achievement in middle childhood? *Child Development*, 80(5), 1329-1349. Votruba-Drzal, E., Coley R.L., & Chase-Lansdale, P.L. (2004). Child care and low-income children's development: Direct and moderated effects. *Child Development*, 75(1), 296-312.

² For more information on Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, see Tout, K., Starr, R., Soli, M., Moodie, S., Kirby, G., & Boller, K. (2010). The Child Care Quality Rating System (QRS) Assessment: Compendium of quality rating systems and evaluations. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation.

³ In this brief, "preschool-aged children" is defined as children between the ages of 2 and 5 years who are not yet in kindergarten.



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early care and education arrangements, the process parents engage in when selecting an early care and education arrangement, and challenges parents face when choosing a provider.

METHODOLOGY

This brief contains a summary of findings from four focus groups with low-income parents conducted as part of a Research Capacity project in Maryland. Focus groups averaged 11 participants per group, and a total of 41 parents participated. Focus groups were conducted in two jurisdictions: Prince George’s County and Baltimore City. Two focus groups with parents who had received a child care subsidy⁴ in the last year and two groups with parents who had not received a subsidy, but were financially eligible to do so were conducted in each jurisdiction. Distribution of the focus group sample by subsidy status and county is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Focus group sample

	Baltimore City	Prince George’s County	Total
Subsidized Parents	11	11	22
Parents Without a Child Care Subsidy	10	9	19
Total	21	20	41

The majority of parents participating in the focus groups were female (88% were either the child’s mother or legal guardian) and 89% were African American. Parents ranged in age from 19-63 years, with a modal age of 30. Parents also varied in educational background: 25% had a high school degree/GED, 33% had a vocational degree or some college, and 20% had a Bachelor’s degree. Parents had between one and five children, with the modal number of children being two. The majority of parents were currently employed (58%), mostly in service occupations. Among those who were not employed, approximately one-quarter were in school.

Select relevant findings from other focus groups with center directors and family child care providers in Baltimore City and Prince George’s County, and resource and referral counselors from throughout the State are included to contextualize parents’ comments. Additional information on the methodology of parent, family child care provider, center director, and resource and referral focus groups is provided on page 10.

PERCEPTIONS OF IDEAL ARRANGEMENTS

In order to assess parents’ definitions of “high-quality care,” in the beginning of the focus group parents were asked to describe their ideal early care and education arrangement. As part of this discussion, parents spontaneously identified elements of an ideal early care and education setting related to schedule, environmental features of the care arrangement (e.g., safety, security, cleanliness, adequate provider-child ratio, and learning materials), activities offered, and characteristics of ideal providers.

Schedule

HOURS OF OPERATION. Both subsidized and non-subsidized parents stated that an ideal early care and education arrangement would have flexible, or extended, hours of operation. Two subsidized parents stated that an ideal arrangement would offer overnight child care to accommodate night shift work hours. Parents who discussed this aspect of an ideal arrangement stated that they had difficulty managing their work schedule with their current providers’ hours of operation.

“I would say a 24-hour daycare, they need longer hours ‘cause this 5:30 stuff is killing me. It’s hard trying to squeeze a job in between daycare hours. They need longer hour daycares.”

– SUBSIDIZED PARENT, BALTIMORE CITY

⁴For more information on the Maryland subsidy program, please see http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/msde/divisions/child_care/subsidy/ or http://www.mdchildcare.org/mdcfc/for_parents/poceligibility.html

Environmental Features

SAFE AND SECURE ENVIRONMENT. Nearly half of all parents in the focus groups discussed safety and security as a feature of an ideal arrangement. This feature was mentioned by more subsidized than non-subsidized parents. Security measures suggested by parents include: an electronic system to ensure that children are going home with someone authorized to pick up the child, security guards at every door to ensure that only authorized personnel enter the facility and/or a system in which passes are required for parents to access children in the facility, and surveillance cameras and webcams available to parents for monitoring classroom activities. Parents expressed the need to have security measures in place and to consistently enforce these measures.

INVITING AND CLEAN PHYSICAL SPACE. Parents from each of the four focus groups discussed components of an ideal early care and education arrangement's physical space. Over half of all parents discussed the importance of a spacious and colorful setting. Parents specifically wanted a bright, pleasant atmosphere that is clean, open (as opposed to confined), and organized, with toys visible and labeled to facilitate children's learning. The cleanliness of the facility was of high importance to subsidized parents in particular, who expressed concern about the children spreading germs to one another. Other desirable physical characteristics of an early care and education setting mentioned by parents include: being smoke-free, dog-free, having a playground on-site, having a soft floor in the playroom, and having a designated area for sick children.

“For me, it would be spacious, and colorful, loaded with lots of activities that are age-appropriate for the children.”

– NON-SUBSIDIZED PARENT, BALTIMORE CITY

ADEQUATE CHILD: PROVIDER RATIO. Parents in three of the four focus groups stated that having an adequate child: provider ratio is one key component of an ideal early care and education arrangement. Having an adequate child: provider ratio was important to parents because it allows for individualized attention and proactive control of behavior issues.

“So when there's lots of kids in a room, it's always, ‘he touched me,’ or ‘he kicked me,’ and I would like to have more aides to manage the group.”

– NON-SUBSIDIZED PARENT, BALTIMORE CITY

“A lot of classrooms are jam packed, one person really can't take care of five kids individually and really give them all of the attention they really need, more one-on-one or two-on-one action [is needed].”

– SUBSIDIZED PARENT, PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY

Activities

STRUCTURED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES. Approximately half of the parents emphasized an intentionally structured environment with age-appropriate learning opportunities and activities as one component of an ideal early care and education arrangement. Both subsidized and non-subsidized parents discussed the need for a structured environment in which children could be engaged and learn. Parents expressed a desire for multiple age-appropriate activities and an academically-based curriculum. Specific activities of interest include: book reading and writing opportunities, exposure to computers, exposure to other languages (e.g., Spanish), physical/hands-on activities, sports, and academically-oriented (e.g., math, reading, writing) learning stations. One parent who was receiving a child care subsidy conveyed an interest in the provider sending home quarterly reports on the children's progress, discussing what they have learned, skills in which they have demonstrated improvement, and skills that are in need of further improvement. In multiple focus groups, parents recounted experiences in which they were disappointed in providers who were simply “watching over” their children rather than teaching them, as well as concerns that their children were being placed in classrooms with younger children, thus depriving them of access to age-appropriate learning opportunities.

“Curriculum, like my son is in a home daycare and he was there watching TV, I don’t bring my child to you to watch TV for 8 hours. He needs to do something, to learn something; this is the most important time for him to be learning.”

– SUBSIDIZED PARENT, BALTIMORE CITY

Characteristics of Ideal Providers

In describing an ideal early care and education arrangement, parents discussed qualities of an ideal provider. Cited characteristics of an ideal provider include: being educated/certified, enthusiastic, patient, nurturing, effective at disciplining, qualified to serve children with disabilities/special needs, and able to teach children respect; having a clean criminal record and not using drugs; enjoying his/her job; and conveying a professional demeanor. Both subsidized and non-subsidized parents also expressed a desire to interact with or establish a relationship with the provider so they could be kept up-to-date on their child’s progress.

“So it’s important... for the daycare providers to like what they do and be excited about it and be hands-on.”

– NON-SUBSIDIZED PARENT, PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY

PARENTS’ PRIORITIES IN SELECTING EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION ARRANGEMENTS

Following discussion of elements of an ideal early care and education arrangement, parents were asked what features they look for when selecting an arrangement for their preschool-aged child. This portion of the focus group protocol asked probing questions to elucidate parents’ priorities in selecting an early care and education arrangement. In addition to asking about features parents look for generally, parents’ knowledge and attitudes towards provider licensing, credentialing, and accreditation⁵ were specifically explored.

In discussing features parents look for when selecting an early care and education arrangement for their preschool-aged child, parents reiterated some of the previously identified elements of an ideal arrangement (e.g., hours of operation, child: provider ratio, and learning opportunities/age-appropriate curricula). However, their primary focus in discussing prioritized features of care focused more on practical issues, such as cost and location, than features related to the quality of the arrangement. Both subsidized and non-subsidized parents emphasized the importance of cost, location, and safety as features they look for when choosing an early child care arrangement. Non-subsidized parents were more likely to highlight having a clean, spacious physical space for their children as well as flexible hours of operation as priorities. Table 2 compares the most commonly identified elements of an ideal early care and education arrangement and features parents look for when selecting an arrangement for their child. Items in the table are listed in order of their popularity as measured by the number of parents who discussed each.

TABLE 2. Comparison of ideal elements of early care and education arrangements and features parents seek when selecting a care arrangement

Ideal Elements of Early Care and Education Arrangements	Priorities in Selecting an Early Care and Education Arrangement
Learning opportunities/age-appropriate curriculum (22 parents)	Cost (16 parents)
Physical space (21 parents)	Location (13 parents)
Provider characteristics (18 parents)	Hours (9 parents)
Safety (17 parents)	Class size/child: provider ratio (7 parents)
Hours (7 parents)	Convenience (5 parents)
Child: provider ratio (4 parents)	Learning opportunities/age-appropriate curriculum (4 parents)

⁵Licensing is defined as the minimum state requirements of an early care and education provider; credentialing refers to the provider’s achievement of a specified number of training hours, years of experience, and professional activities; and accreditation is the assessment of a facility by an accredited organization. For more information, please see http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/divisions/child_care/child_care.htm.

Importance of Accreditation, Credentialing and Licensing

When parents were asked whether they considered provider licensing, credentialing, or accreditation when selecting an early care and education provider for their child, the majority of parents (70%) responded that this was either a low priority or not a consideration in their decision. Non-subsidized parents were more likely to say that the terms licensed, credentialed, or accredited meant nothing to them and that having those qualities does not make a provider “good at what they do.” In focus groups with subsidized parents, five parents discussed their understanding of the meaning of these terms, stating that having a license or accreditation indicates that the provider is legitimate; credentialing is a qualification indicating experience, knowledge, and a thorough background check; and being licensed or accredited gives parents more leverage to report a problem with the provider should it be necessary. When subsidized parents in one focus group were asked if they understood the differences between licensing and accreditation, parents unanimously responded no.

“Having licensed or accredited tells me they are legitimate. And I’m a person who asks questions about everything every week, so I need to know that teachers are qualified and not just coming in with their application and getting a job. I mean, you’re qualified, and then if you are qualified, I need to see the results of your qualification.”

– SUBSIDIZED PARENT, PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY

“With a license, you just go to school. Within 6 months, I could have a license and do daycare. I know kids ‘cause I am old enough cause I have kids and I love kids, but that don’t make me official, a daycare provider.”

– NON-SUBSIDIZED PARENT, BALTIMORE CITY

“Being licensed, but I mean actually accredited, is that even required of daycares?”

– SUBSIDIZED PARENT, PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY

Both subsidized and non-subsidized parents stated that a provider’s experience and the quality of care he/she offers are more important than a license, credential, or accreditation. One non-subsidized parent stated that accreditation, credentialing, and licensing are actually barriers to selecting a provider as she perceived providers with these qualifications to be more expensive.

In a separate focus group with resource and referral counselors who educate parents regarding child care options and explain licensing, credentialing, and accreditation to parents, the counselors were asked about their experiences talking to parents about these terms. The counselors, who worked in multiple regions throughout Maryland, stated that it is standard for them to introduce parents to these terms before providing child care options. Counselors indicated that though some parents are interested in learning about credentialing and accreditation, when told the cost of arrangements that are accredited, parents tend to inquire about less expensive options.

Focus groups with family child care providers and center directors serving low-income families in Baltimore City and Prince George’s County also indicated that, in their experience, few parents ask about credentialing and even fewer ask about accreditation status. Parents do, according to family child care providers and center directors, consistently ask whether an arrangement is licensed.

CHILD CARE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The process parents engage in when selecting an early care and education arrangement was explored through focus group discussion, a written flow chart exercise, and questions on a self-administered questionnaire. During the focus group discussion, parents were asked about the sources they trust in obtaining information about early care and education options. Additionally, during the focus groups, each parent was also asked to fill in a blank flow chart with the decision-making process they use in selecting an early care and education arrangement and engage in a group discussion around the decision-making processes described. Finally, on a self-administered questionnaire that was distributed at the conclusion of the focus group, parents were asked questions about the number of affordable and convenient options they had when selecting an early care and education arrangement for their child,

and, if they felt limited in their options, what limited them. Information from each of these data collection methods are presented below.

Sources of Information about Early Care and Education Arrangements

In order to learn more about the sources of information parents use in selecting an early care and education arrangement, parents were asked who they relied on for information and help when they were choosing an early care and education arrangement for their preschool-aged child. The three main sources of information parents trusted were: personal or professional referrals, media outlets, and independent research, such as looking up reviews of child care programs on the internet, browsing child care magazines, and searching through the phonebook. Both subsidized and non-subsidized parents indicated that their primary source of information is word-of-mouth referrals from family members, friends, or other parents who had experience selecting an early care and education arrangement. Subsidized parents specifically discussed seeking information from other subsidized parents regarding affordable, high-quality arrangements that accept subsidies. Parents in each focus group also indicated that they used professional referrals from agencies, such as resource and referral centers, foster care agencies, medical professionals, other social service agencies, and from child care providers themselves. In three out of the four parent focus groups, parents reported using media outlets (e.g., TV commercials, local magazines, and newspapers) and conducting their own research via the internet to obtain information about early care and education settings. Parents specifically discussed using the internet to research parent reviews of programs and to look up programs they had seen advertised on television or in their community.

“Somebody who is in the same position as you, that had child care, daycare already, that could be a neighbor, a nephew, whomever, but I mean, if they goin’ through the same thing, then you always gonna rely on someone who’s goin’ through what you’re goin’ through.”

— NON-SUBSIDIZED PARENT, BALTIMORE CITY

Child Care Decision-Making Process

ACTIONS USED IN THE PROCESS. In order to determine the steps that parents take in the decision-making process, during the focus group each parent was asked to generate a flow-chart detailing the process they used the last time they selected an early care and education arrangement. Thirty-six of the forty-one parents participating in the focus groups completed a flow chart. Based on the thirty-six completed flow charts, five actions emerged as being most commonly used: visiting programs (44%), personal research (e.g., using the internet, television or publications; 31%), interviews of providers or programs (22%), consideration of a referral from a friend or other informant (19%), and dropping in on programs unannounced (17%). Other, less commonly⁶ cited actions included: calling providers by phone, observing the provider in the classroom, reading reviews of the provider, visiting the website of the provider, checking references, developing a budget to assess which providers might be affordable, and making a pro/con list to narrow down a list of providers.

Differences in the frequency of action steps from the decision-making process flow chart activity emerged by location of the focus group and subsidy status. Parents in Prince George’s County were more likely to do personal research and drop-in on providers, whereas parents in Baltimore City were more likely to use a word-of-mouth referral. Parents receiving a subsidy were more likely to report taking a tour of the arrangement or dropping in on providers unannounced than non-subsidized parents.

ORDER OF ACTIONS. In the flowchart exercise, all parents indicated that they start the process of choosing an early care and education arrangement by either doing research about their options or establishing a budget for what they can afford. After this initial step, no distinct patterns emerged in the order of remaining action steps. This lack of consistency likely reflects the distinct needs (e.g., coordination of care arrangements for other children in the family) and constraints (e.g., transportation, cost) faced by each family.

⁶“Less common” actions have been defined as actions used by less than 10% of respondents.

VARIATIONS IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROVIDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHILD CARE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS. In focus groups with center directors and family child care providers in Prince George's County and Baltimore City, directors and providers distinguished between the decision-making process of parents who were and were not using a child care subsidy. Both directors and family child care providers perceived that most parents receiving a child care subsidy feel a sense of urgency to find an arrangement due to employment or training demands and that these constraints shorten the time a parent takes to make a decision. Directors and family child care providers also perceived that parents receiving a subsidy, on average, tend to be more focused on cost and less evaluative of the quality offered by arrangements during the child care decision-making process. Some directors and providers posited that differential decision-making strategies between parents who were and were not receiving a subsidy reflected differences in parents' ages, with younger parents being more likely to receive a subsidy. Though parents from the focus groups who were receiving a subsidy were younger than those who weren't receiving a subsidy⁷, none of the distinctions in parents' decision-making process discussed by directors and providers were evident in the parent focus groups. In fact, in the parent focus groups, non-subsidized parents were more likely to say cost was a priority than subsidized parents.

Available Options and Challenges in Selecting an Early Care and Education Arrangement

Via self-administered questionnaire, parents were asked how many realistic⁸ options they considered during their last search for an early care and education arrangement for their preschool-aged child. Parents, on average, reported considering between two and three options during their last search for a provider, with non-subsidized parents considering, on average, 1-2 options and subsidized parents considering, on average 2-3 options. Few parents (2) reported having no realistic options, and less than a quarter of parents reported considering between four and ten realistic options. During the focus groups, parents spoke of multiple challenges that arise when searching for and choosing a setting that meets all of their needs. The most frequent challenges parents faced was finding a setting that accommodated the hours they needed at a price they could afford, and within a convenient location. Parents in all four focus groups voiced the difficulty they had in finding an early care and education arrangement that accommodated their work schedule.

"I mean, I didn't take a job because of the timing of it. She [my wife] gotta be at work at 7:30am, my 5 year old gotta be at school at this time, my 2 year old, if I'm working, gotta go to her grandfather's house. So, ya know, depending on how the situation works...it affects my life."

— NON-SUBSIDIZED PARENT, PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY

On the self-administered questionnaire, which allowed for quantitative statistical testing, parents were asked if they felt limited in the early care and education options available to them, and if so, what limited their options. Three-quarters of parents said that their options were limited and more non-subsidized parents felt limited in their early care and education options than subsidized parents. No differences in perception of limited options were found by jurisdiction or parent age. Among parents who reported having limited options, the following challenges were listed:

- being unable to afford the providers in whom they were interested (51%)
- constraints due to limited transportation (42%)
- not having enough providers to choose from (22%)
- providers not accepting child care subsidies (17%)
- being limited because they had to coordinate available options with the arrangements of other children in their family (12%)

⁷ Among parents who participated in the focus groups, 75% of young parents (ages 19-25), 50% of middle aged parents (ages 26-34), and 31% of older parents (ages 36-63) were receiving a child care subsidy.

⁸ "Realistic" options were defined as those that were in a feasible price range and convenient enough to be seriously considered by parents.

When asked about limitations in available options as part of the focus group discussion, parents indicated that finding care with the “ideal qualities” identified earlier in the group discussion was challenging due to: limited capacity of providers or waiting lists for programs, inconvenient locations and limited hours among programs with ideal characteristics, and a lack of programs that address special issues facing their child (e.g., difficulty in toilet training).

Parents in Prince George’s County were more likely to feel limited by transportation to early care and education arrangements, perhaps due to the greater sprawl of the county compared to Baltimore City. A greater proportion of parents in Prince George’s County also felt that their options were limited by the affordability of providers. According to responses from the self-administered questionnaire, 65% of parents in Prince George’s County reported that affordability limited their selection compared to 38% of parents in Baltimore City.⁹ Subsidized parents indicated that subsidy co-pay levels affected their decision making. Specifically, subsidized parents perceived that out-of-pocket costs exceed what parents can afford and consequently these costs affect what type of care or arrangement is chosen.

“It depends on the center and the prices, ‘cause some might be \$100 I have to pay for a co-pay and one [center] over here might be cheaper...with a \$60 co-pay.”

– SUBSIDIZED PARENT, PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY

Implications for Policies, Programs, and Future Research

Understanding how parents select an early care and education arrangement, what features they prioritize, the process they use in making decisions, and challenges they experience in selecting an arrangement can facilitate improvements in both subsidy policies and programs designed to improve the quality of early care and education offered in the State of Maryland. Before discussing potential implications from this study for policies and programs, it is important to acknowledge the small and geographically-limited sample for this study. Though findings from this study are interesting and relevant to the development or refinement of policies and programs in Maryland, caution must be taken when generalizing findings. Future studies that explore the findings from this study with a larger and more geographically-diverse sample are warranted.

Maryland’s child care subsidy program (CCS) is administered by the State, though some features of the program are subject to guidelines and requirements of the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidy program. The main federal priorities for CCDF subsidies are to support: 1) parental employment, and 2) the provision of high quality care.¹⁰ In recognition of families’ unique needs and constraints in selecting early care and education arrangements, the subsidy program was designed to facilitate parental choice by providing parents with vouchers that could be used for their provider of choice. As parents are permitted to choose their provider, with minimal constraints from the subsidy program, knowledge about the processes parents use in selecting a provider is central to developing subsidy policies that support the federal priorities for this program.

Results from this study could be used to modify subsidy policies to better facilitate parental choice of high-quality, reliable early care and education providers. For example, a significant proportion of subsidized parents perceive that they have limited early care and education options from which to choose. In addition to constraints imposed by the limited number of conveniently located providers, some subsidized parents are further restricted in their options by providers who do not accept child care subsidies. Raising the subsidy program’s provider reimbursement rates¹¹ and improving the efficiency of provider reimbursements could help to minimize this restriction.

⁹This finding is supported by data on child care cost by county in Maryland. As of 2010, the estimated cost of child care in Prince George’s County was about \$2,470 more per year than in Baltimore City. For more information please see <http://www.mdchildcare.org/mdcfc/pdfs/demographics.pdf>.

¹⁰<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/occ/ccdf/factsheet.htm>

¹¹ Subsidy vouchers reimburse providers for their services according to a regionally-defined rate determined by the State of Maryland, based on a study of market rates in that area.

Another constraint subsidized parents experience in choosing a provider relates to the cost of care. The child care subsidy program has a progressive parent copay¹², meaning that low-income parents who are eligible for a subsidy are responsible for a copay commensurate with their family's income, with relatively higher income families having a larger copay than relatively lower income families. The subsidy copay level is determined by the state and collected by the early care and education provider. In practice, however, parents experience with copays and out-of-pocket expenses is more complex. In order to be competitive, or out of compassion for families' circumstances, some providers waive a portion of the parent copay. Further, in addition to charging a copay, providers are permitted to charge parents fees (e.g., registration fee, activity fee, etc.) in addition to parents' copays. These fees are program-specific and thus not universal across settings. For these reasons, there is cost variation among subsidized arrangements and cost remains a significant consideration among subsidized parents selecting an early care and education arrangement. Due to the complexity of provider practices, it is challenging to propose changes to subsidy policy that could address these cost considerations. However, a review of subsidy copay policies in light of families' income and cost of living is recommended.

The findings of this brief also have important implications for programs designed to improve the quality of early care and education offered in the State of Maryland. Understanding how parents choose among early care and education providers is central to developing Maryland's new QRIS, Maryland EXCELS. In the process of refining Maryland EXCELS, developers are encouraged to:

- consider the sources of information parents trust, the short time frame in which many parents make choices, and parents' priorities in selecting an early care and education arrangement. This information could help in designing quality ratings that appeal to parents and are accessible during the decision-making process;
- use internet and television in marketing Maryland EXCELS;
- be aware of low-income parents' lack of knowledge regarding distinctions between provider licensing, credentialing, and accreditation; and
- ensure that differences among quality ratings in Maryland EXCELS are intuitive and accessible.

Findings of this study also highlight the possibility that early care and education options with high QRIS ratings may be lacking in some disenfranchised neighborhoods. QRIS developers, in collaboration with child care subsidy administrators, may be able to identify policy levers that can be used to enhance the number of high quality early care and education options available in low-income areas.

In conclusion, this research brief presents important information regarding parents' definitions of high quality care, priorities and the processes parents use in selecting an early care and education arrangement, and factors that limit parents' options. Considerations for policy and program development and refinement are offered. Future research is encouraged to further explore and replicate the findings presented in this brief.

¹² By federal guidance, the copay is not to exceed 10% of the families' income. More information about Maryland's parent copayment levels are available at http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/divisions/child_care/subsidy/rates.htm

ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE AND METHOD USED FOR THIS BRIEF

The data for this brief came from a series of focus groups conducted by Child Trends researchers in the Fall of 2009 and the Fall of 2010 in Prince George's County and Baltimore City, Maryland. Focus groups are discussions with a small group of people selected because they share characteristics and backgrounds that are thought to be critical to understanding the issue at hand. Child Trends completed four focus groups with child care center directors (two in each location), four groups with family child care providers (two in each location), two focus groups with parents who used child care subsidy in the past year (one in each location) and two groups with parents who were not using a child care subsidy (one in each location). Additionally, one focus group was held with resource and referral counselors from across the state. The study protocol underwent review by an Institutional Review Board and is available upon request. In addition to participating in the focus group discussion, at the conclusion of the focus group, participants were asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire, which gathered information on the demographics of participants in addition to select questions of interest specific to each respondent group. Parents also participated in a flow-chart exercise during the focus group, which elucidated the steps they take when making child care decisions. Data from the focus group discussions and aggregated findings from the flow chart exercise and self-administered questionnaires form the basis of this brief.

Parents living in high poverty zip codes within Baltimore City and Prince George's County were recruited for the focus group study from child care programs, public school pre-kindergarten programs, Head Start, community/recreation centers, health centers, and online advertisements through Craig's List. Demographic information on participating parents is provided in the methodology section of this brief.

Center directors and family child care providers were recruited from the same high poverty zip codes through provider lists provided by the Maryland Family Network, Maryland's Child Care Resource and Referral Agency. Participants were eligible if they served children between the ages of 2 and 5 years and served at least one child subsidized through Maryland's child care subsidy program in the past year. Thirty-three center directors (18 in the city of Baltimore and 15 in Prince George's county) and thirty family child care providers (18 in the city of Baltimore and 12 in Prince George's county) participated in the focus groups. Overall, participating center directors and family child care providers range in age from 26 to 68 years old (mean age for center directors = 43 years and mean age for family child care providers = 47 years) and the majority were African American (85% of center directors and 100% of family child care providers). Center directors had been in their current position an average of 7 years, while family child care providers had been providing care out of their homes an average of 9 years. Center directors reported an average enrollment of 45 children in their centers (range: 8 to 125 children) and family child care providers served an average of 6 children in their home (range: 1-14 children). Center director focus groups had 10 participants, on average, and family child care providers had 9 participants, on average. Among other topics, center directors and family child care providers were asked open-ended questions about their observations of parents' child care decision-making process and definitions of high quality care.

Resource and referral counselors from throughout the State were invited to participate in a focus group facilitated in a private room at the Baltimore City office of the Maryland Family Network. All resource and referral counselor focus group participants were female and had a Bachelor's degree. Resource and referral counselors in the sample ranged in age from 25-60 (average age= 45). The majority of resource and referral counselors (56%) were White. Resource and referral counselors were in their current position for an average of 6 years (range=3-19 years). Resource and referral counselors were asked about their experiences and observations while assisting parents with their child care decision-making process.

Other research briefs from this study are available at <http://www.mdmresearchpartnership.com/>. For more information about data regarding definitions of high quality care and school readiness, please see *Providing High Quality Care in Low Income Areas in Maryland: Definitions, Resources, and Challenges from Parents and Child Care Providers' Perspectives and Defining School Readiness in Maryland: A Multi-Dimensional Perspective*.

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