



Defining School Readiness in Maryland: A Multi-Dimensional Perspective

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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.

INTRODUCTION

Increased emphasis has been placed on children's ability to enter kindergarten ready to learn, a concept referred to as "school readiness". School readiness has been defined by the Maryland State Department of Education as "the stage of human development that enables a child to engage in, and benefit from, primary learning experiences".¹ Components of school readiness include physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional capabilities, and language and comprehension skills, coupled with general knowledge that allows a child to enter a classroom ready to work.¹ Children who are prepared for school upon kindergarten entry typically have a positive trajectory in their educational career.² However, research has shown that children from disadvantaged backgrounds lag behind their more affluent peers on a range of cognitive and social skills, and that these disparities begin well before children enter kindergarten.³

In order to support children's school readiness, national and statewide initiatives have been targeted to disadvantaged children aged birth to five years. These initiatives include Early Head Start/Head Start, public pre-kindergarten, and quality improvements to community-based child care programs through the Child Care and Development Fund.⁴ Further, states have been developing early learning guidelines, or benchmarks for assessing skills indicative of school readiness, as well as assessments that can be used to assess kindergartener's readiness.⁵

¹ Maryland State Department of Education. (2009). Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR): Framework and standards for prekindergarten, revised edition. Baltimore, MD: Maryland State Department of Education.

² Hair, E., Halle, T., Terry-Humen, E., Lavelle, B., & Calkins, J. (2006). Children's school readiness in the ECLS-K: Predictions to academic, health, and social outcomes in first grade. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21, 431-454; Konold, T. R., & Pianta, R. C. (2005). Empirically-derived, person-oriented patterns of school readiness in typically-developing children: Description and prediction to first-grade achievement. *Applied Developmental Science*, 9(4), 174-187.

³ Barbarin, O., Bryant, D., McCandies, T., Burchinal, M., Early, D., Clifford, R., et al. (2006). Children enrolled in public pre-k: The relation of family life, neighborhood quality, and socioeconomic resources to early competence. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76(2), 265-276; Claessens, A., Duncan, G. J., & Engel, M. (2009). Kindergarten skills and fifth-grade achievement: Evidence from the ECLS-K. *Economics of Education Review*, 28(4), 415-427; Halle, T., Forry, N., Hair, E., Perper, K., Wandner, L., Wessel, J., & Vick, J., (2009). *Disparities in Early Learning and Development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)*. Washington, DC: Child Trends; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Jack P. Schonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Board on Children, Youth, and Families: Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

⁴ For more information about Early Head Start: <http://www.ehsnrc.org/>; Head Start: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/About%20Head%20Start>; public pre-kindergarten: <http://www.preknow.org/>; Child Care and Development Fund: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/occ/ccdf/factsheet.htm>

⁵ Daily, S., Burkhauser, M., & Halle, T. (June 2010). A review of school readiness practices in the states: Early learning guidelines and assessments. *Early Childhood Highlights*, Vol. 1, #3. Washington, DC: Child Trends.



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Maryland has implemented the Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR), a state-wide system to support school readiness, including instruction, assessment, professional development opportunities, and transition practices which include communication with families, collaboration and coordination between preschool, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers.⁶ The MMSR includes early learning standards covering seven domains of learning: social and personal development, language and literacy, mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, social studies, the arts, and physical development and health. The assessment component of the MMSR uses specific indicators of the Work Sampling System™⁷, a portfolio-based assessment system that aligns to the Maryland State Curriculum Standards for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten in the seven domains of learning. Kindergarten teachers assess and rate students on the Standards and Indicators during the first eight weeks of the school year and provide this assessment data to MSDE for the School Readiness Report produced each year. Teachers continue to assess children throughout the year to document progress in the seven domains learning to inform classroom instruction and differentiated teaching practices for the individual child.

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

This research brief aims to provide information that can help shape professional development and quality supports aimed at improving children’s school readiness through early care and education. Drawing from qualitative data, this brief begins by comparing and contrasting center directors, family child care providers, and kindergarten teachers’ definitions of school readiness. Next, early care and education providers’ roles in preparing children for school are explored from the perspectives of each of these respondent groups. Finally, supports and challenges in preparing children for school are presented and implications for policies, programs, and future research are shared.

METHODOLOGY

This brief contains a summary of findings from a total of ten focus groups conducted with center directors, family child care providers, and kindergarten teachers recruited from zip codes in Baltimore City or Prince George’s County with a high poverty density. Table 1 provides a synopsis of the number of focus groups by respondent type and location. Focus groups averaged between 9 and 11 participants per group, depending on respondent type. A total of 33 center directors, 30 family child care providers, and 22 kindergarten teachers participated.

TABLE 1. Number of focus groups by respondent type and location

	Baltimore City	Prince George’s County	Total
Center Directors	2	2	4
Family Child Care Providers	2	2	4
Kindergarten Teachers	1	1	2

Center directors and family child care providers participating in the focus groups ranged in age from 26 to 68 years, with an average age of 43 for center directors and 47 for family child care providers. Eighty-five percent of center directors and 100% of family child care providers participating in the focus groups were African American. Almost half of the center directors in the sample had a college or graduate degree (42%), an additional 42% had an Associate’s degree, and 10% had a high school degree.⁸ The greatest proportion of family child care providers had a high school degree (53%), 20% had an Associate’s degree or some college experience, and 20% had a Bachelor’s or graduate degree.⁹ Center directors had been in their current position an average of 7 years, while family child care providers had been providing care in their homes an average of 9 years. Center directors reported an

⁶ For more information on the Maryland Model for School Readiness, see <http://mdk12.org/instruction/ensure/MMSR/MMSRFA1.html>

⁷ Meisels, S.J., Mardsen, D.B., Jablon, J.R., Dorfman, A.B., & Dichtelmiller, M.K. (2001). *The Work Sampling System (WSS)*. New York, NY: Pearson.

⁸ Two center directors did not complete the self-administered questionnaire.

⁹ One home-based provider had not completed high school and one did not complete the self-administered questionnaire.

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).

Twenty-two kindergarten teachers from fifteen schools in Baltimore City and Prince George’s County participated in the focus groups. Eighty-seven percent of the schools represented by these kindergarten teachers receive Title I funding. Kindergarten teachers were predominantly female (95%) and ranged in age from 24-59 (mean age = 31). Half of the teachers were African American, 46% were white and 4% were Asian. All of the teachers had at least a Bachelor’s degree and 90% had some post-graduate education or a Master’s degree. Teachers had, on average, 8 years of experience; though a wide range in years of experience was represented (2-34 years).

For more information about the recruitment strategy and methodology of this study, see page 11.

DEFINITIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS

In order to understand, compare, and contrast definitions of school readiness from the perspectives of community-based center directors, family child care providers, and kindergarten teachers; each of these respondent groups was asked, from their perspective and based on their experience, what it means for a child to be “ready for school” and what skills or abilities children should have upon kindergarten entry. In presenting details from the focus group discussion, a framework of six dimensions (pre-academic skills, social skills, emotional skills, practical life skills, motor skills, and safety information) is used. These dimensions were identified through thematic analysis of focus group discussions. Though all seven domains of the MMSR school readiness model were not discussed, each of the dimensions discussed in the focus group did align with one or more of the MMSR school readiness domains. A summary of this overlap is provided in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Alignment between dimensions of school readiness discussed in focus groups and MMSR school readiness domains

MMSR School Readiness Domain	Dimensions Based on Focus Group Results
Language And Literacy	Pre-academic skills
Mathematical Thinking	Pre-academic skills
Scientific Thinking	N/A
Social Studies	N/A
Social And Personal Development	Social skills Emotional skills Practical life skills
Physical Development And Health	Motor skills Safety information
The Arts	N/A

Table 3 details the specific knowledge or abilities identified as being indicative of school readiness by family child care providers, center directors, and kindergarten teachers, based on their perceptions and experience. The first column in this table lists the relevant MMSR School Readiness domain, the second column lists the dimension of school readiness that was discussed in the focus groups, the third and fourth columns capture family child care providers’ and center directors’ responses to the question of what it means for children to be ready for school, and the final column lists the skills kindergarten teachers identified as being critical for children to have mastered at the time of kindergarten entry in order for them to succeed in kindergarten.

TABLE 3. Knowledge and abilities identified as being indicative of school readiness by family child care providers, center directors, and kindergarten teachers

MMSR		Family Child Care Providers	Center Directors	Kindergarten Teachers
Language/Literacy, Mathematical thinking	Pre-Academics	<p>Highlighted in 3 of 4 family child care provider groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic knowledge (colors, letters, numbers, basic vocabulary) Pre-literacy skills (sounds, sight words, early reading) Pre-numeracy skills (sorting, drawing patterns, counting) 	<p>Highlighted in 3 of 4 center director groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic knowledge (colors, letters, shapes) Writing skills: (ability to write one's name) Pre-literacy skills (early reading) Pre-numeracy skills (counting) 	<p>Highlighted in 2 of 2 kindergarten teacher groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic knowledge (colors, letters, shapes, basic vocabulary) Verbal skills (ability to use vocabulary words in a classroom setting) Pre-literacy skills (knowledge of how to hold a book)
	Personal and Social Development	Social Skills	<p>Highlighted in 4 of 4 family child care provider groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow directions and rules (sit and listen) Ability to positively interact with other children (respect and work well with others) Ability to express oneself 	<p>Highlighted in 4 of 4 center director groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow directions and rules (walk in a straight line, sit quietly, raise one's hand, listen quietly) Ability to positively interact with other children (play in a group, share) Ability to pay attention and participate in group activities
Emotional Skills		<p>Highlighted in 3 of 4 family child care provider groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to regulate emotions (control anger and rage) Positive self-esteem Excitement about learning 	<p>Highlighted in 2 of 4 center director groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to regulate emotions (control anger without being aggressive) Positive self-esteem Excitement about learning 	<p>Highlighted in 2 of 2 kindergarten teacher groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-esteem/self-worth Excitement about learning (curiosity, inquisitiveness)
Practical Life Skills		<p>Highlighted in 2 of 4 family child care provider groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to take responsibility for belongings Personal hygiene (ability to use the bathroom independently, hand washing) 	<p>Highlighted in 2 of 4 center director groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to take responsibility for belongings Ability to dress self (tie shoes, put coat on) Ability to stay awake during the day Ability to make choices 	<p>Highlighted in 2 of 2 kindergarten teacher groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to dress self (tie shoes) Personal hygiene (ability to use the bathroom independently)
Physical Development and Health	Motor Skills	<p>Highlighted in 1 of 4 family child care provider groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to hold crayons/pencils, cut, and type 	<p>Not highlighted in any center director groups</p>	<p>Highlighted in 2 of 2 kindergarten teacher focus groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to hold pencils, trace, and cut
	Safety Information	<p>Highlighted in 3 of 4 family child care provider groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of safety information (parent's name, home address and phone number, police as safe resource) 	<p>Highlighted in 1 of 4 center director groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of safety information 	<p>Highlighted in 2 of 2 kindergarten teacher groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of own name

Pre-Academic Skills

Select pre-academic skills were discussed as being indicative of children’s readiness for kindergarten by family child care providers (three of four groups), center directors (three of four groups), and teachers (both kindergarten groups). There was general agreement regarding the necessary pre-academic skills needed prior to kindergarten entry across these three respondent groups. However, center directors described specific pre-academic skills in more detail than family child care providers. Specific pre-academic skills necessary for successful entry into kindergarten discussed by center directors, family child care providers, and/or kindergarten teachers are found in the following indicators of the Language and Literacy and Mathematical Thinking school readiness domains.^{10,11}

Language/Literacy	Mathematical Thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none">General Reading Processes: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary, and Comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Knowledge of Algebra, Patterns and/or FunctionsKnowledge of GeometryKnowledge of Number Relationships and Computations/Arithmetic

Social Skills

Social skills, and specifically children’s abilities to follow directions and interact positively with other children, were discussed in each of the focus groups across all respondent types. Social skills discussed (e.g., ability to follow directions, positively interact with other children, express oneself, maintain personal boundaries, and participate in group activities) are reflected in objectives from two of the three indicators of the Personal and Social Development domain of the MMSR: personal self-regulation and social regulation. Focus group participants from each of the three respondent groups perceived children’s ability to interact with others appropriately prior to entering kindergarten to be fundamental.

Emotional Skills

Emotional skills were discussed in half of the center director groups, three of the four family child care provider groups, and both groups with kindergarten teachers. Specific emotional skills discussed in the focus groups (e.g., self-esteem, emotional control, and excitement about learning) are included in the personal self-regulation and approaches to learning indicators within the Social and Personal Development domain of the MMSR. In discussing emotional skills needed for kindergarten, both center directors and family child care providers expressed deep concern regarding anger, rage, and sadness they observed in many of the children for whom they care for.

Practical Life Skills

Practical life skills were discussed in half of the center director and family child care provider groups and both kindergarten teacher groups. Practical life skills discussed include personal hygiene (potty training and hand washing), independence in dressing (specifically, putting on shoes and coats), and taking responsibility for one’s belongings. Some of these skills (e.g., taking responsibility for belongings) are captured in the personal self-regulation indicator of the Social and Personal Development domain of the MMSR. More basic skills, such as potty training and dressing oneself are not captured in the MMSR.

Motor Skills

Motor skills were not highlighted in any of the center director focus groups and in only one family child care provider group. However, in both kindergarten teacher groups, fine motor skills (e.g., ability to hold crayons/pencils, cut, and type) were identified as a prerequisite to a successful start in kindergarten, and one that not all children have mastered prior to kindergarten entry.

¹⁰ Only one family child care provider, in all of the center director and family child care provider focus groups, mentioned the Maryland Model for School Readiness during discussion of this topic.

¹¹ Detailed information on objectives and indicators for each of the MMSR domains of school readiness is available here: http://mdk12.org/instruction/mmsrexemplars/pdf/ExemplarsPrekindergarten_Fall.pdf

Safety Information

Knowledge of safety information was mentioned in three of the four family child care provider groups, one of four center director groups, and both of the kindergarten teacher groups. Though center directors and family child care providers emphasized children's knowledge of safety information (e.g., knowledge of parents' names, phone number, and address); kindergarten teachers tended to focus on the children's knowledge of his or her own name.

In conclusion, across the six dimensions of school readiness discussed in the focus groups, there was strong alignment between the skills family child care providers and center directors identified as being critical to learning. Though many of the same skills were discussed by center directors and family child care providers, discussion of these skills differed qualitatively across groups. For example, during group discussions, center directors demonstrated a more nuanced awareness of pre-academic school readiness skills compared to family child care providers. Skills identified by family child care providers and center directors as being indicative of school readiness matched those identified by kindergarten teachers across most domains, though kindergarten teachers were unique in emphasizing motor skills as a prerequisite to learning in kindergarten. Finally, though not all domains or objectives of the MMSR school readiness assessments were raised in the focus groups; most skills and abilities¹² discussed by center directors, family child care providers, and kindergarten teachers were included in MMSR objectives.

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROVIDERS' ROLES IN PREPARING CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL

After discussing center directors', family child care providers', and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the definition of school readiness, the role of child care providers in preparing children for kindergarten was explored. Family child care providers and center directors were asked what role, if any, they play in getting children ready for school. Likewise, kindergarten teachers were asked for their expectations of early care and education providers in preparing children for kindergarten.

Both center directors and family child care providers expressed a sense of responsibility for getting children ready for school. Center directors' emphasis on promoting school readiness is derived from their perceptions that: 1) the Maryland State Department of Education expects children to enter kindergarten with certain skills, 2) current cohorts of children entering child care have less pre-academic knowledge than previous cohorts, 3) children are receptive and excited to learn in early care and education settings, and 4) children who do not enter school ready to learn will not fare well in their future academic career. Center directors reported feeling increased pressure from the schools to send children who are well prepared to learn. Family child care providers' commitment to preparing children for school stems from: 1) their dedication to the children, and 2) their acknowledgement that children spend long hours in care and relatively few hours while awake with their parents and families.

Center directors stated that they prefer to emphasize the development of social-emotional skills as they perceive these skills to be paramount to children's ability to learn and concentrate in school. However, center directors reported being pressured by parents to focus more on the academic aspect of school readiness. Though family child care providers discussed the importance of social skills, they reported focusing more on direct, one-on-one instruction of academic skills than social skills.¹³ Family child care providers in one focus group and center directors in three focus groups expressed their perceptions that parents want their children to be ready for school and that parents expect child care providers to be primarily responsible for their children's school preparation.

When asked about their expectations of early care and education providers, kindergarten teachers explained that, from their perspective, it is not critical for children to come to kindergarten with academic skills, though experiencing some form of pre-academic learning before entering kindergarten was helpful. Kindergarten teach-

¹² Exceptions included basic self-care skills, such as potty training and dressing oneself.

¹³ Though center directors placed less emphasis on pre-academic skills than family child care providers during this section of the focus group, the strategies center directors reported using to prepare children for kindergarten tended to be more closely aligned with Maryland's MMSR system than strategies used by family child care providers.

ers noted that if children come into kindergarten with strong social-emotional skills, it is much easier for them to be taught academic skills; and when children enter kindergarten without these social-emotional skills, instruction for all children in the classroom is disrupted as teachers need to spend more time engaging in behavior management. In short, teachers felt imparting academic knowledge to be their responsibility, rather than the responsibility of early care and education providers, but acknowledged imparting academic knowledge to children is challenging if children do not enter kindergarten with social-emotional skills, such as an ability to control their emotions and behaviors, interact well with others, and follow directions.

“I think a lot of times you want them to know letters, but I don’t think it’s necessary for them to know all of them, but it’s more the readiness to want to be there.”

—PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY KINDERGARTEN TEACHER

STRATEGIES IN PREPARING CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL

In addition to speaking about their perceived roles in preparing children for kindergarten, center directors and family child care providers were asked about the specific strategies they use to prepare children for kindergarten. Family child care providers’ and center directors’ responses were organized into three categories: teaching strategies, curricula, and supporting the transition to kindergarten. A comparison of center- and home-based providers’ strategies within each of these categories is provided below.

Teaching Strategies

Center directors and family child care providers highlighted a variety of teaching strategies in preparing children for school. Teaching strategies discussed by both center directors and family child care providers include: age appropriate activities that allow time for children to learn, play, and nap; and the facilitation of learning at home by providing parents with activities they can do with their child. Center directors discussed two teaching strategies that were not discussed by family child care providers: exposing children to a variety of activities that foster different skills through a structured schedule (e.g., center time) and a focus on small group work. Family child care providers discussed one teaching strategy that was not mentioned by center directors, namely, teaching language by labeling objects in the home and using videos with word cards.

“You’d be amazed at even the little bit of time that you spend with the three and four year olds, um, doing the flash cards and then givin’ them a worksheet that says color the number ones or something. They’ll be so excited for that 10, 15 minutes. And then they’ll be off to outside. You know. And then lunch. And you’ve done a whole, I mean you’ve done a lesson in a time frame that was appropriate for them.”

—BALTIMORE CITY FAMILY CHILD CARE PROVIDER

Curricula

Use of curricula was mentioned in each of the center director and family child care provider focus groups as a tool used to prepare children for school. A range of curricula were used by center directors and family child care providers. Whereas three out of eleven curricula reported by center directors were recommended by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE)¹⁴, none of the family child care providers reported using an MSDE-recommended curriculum. Rather, family child care providers discussed making up their own curricula, using Montessori-based curricula, or using activity books purchased from chain stores, such as Wal-Mart.

Supporting the Transition to Kindergarten

In addition to the strategies and curricula above, assisting with the transition of children to school was discussed in one family child care provider group and one center director group. Strategies for assisting children with the transi-

¹⁴ For more information about MSDE recommended curricula, see http://marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/divisions/child_care/preschool_curriculum/overview.

tion to school focused on sharing information with teachers about a child’s strengths and limitations before school begins.

Kindergarten teachers discussed transitions from early care and education settings to kindergarten in great depth. Teachers participating in the focus groups stated that they knew what type of care children in their classroom were in the prior year. This knowledge was obtained through conversations with parents; knowing the child was in the school’s pre-kindergarten program; school-, teacher-, or county-created forms; or MMSR forms. Kindergarten teachers reported that direct conversations with the child’s prior early care and education provider were uncommon, but that communication was more likely when the provider was located within the school as is the case for pre-kindergarten programs and some Head Start programs. Four teachers stated that they had talked to children’s prior early care and education provider.¹⁵ In addition to conversations with early care and education providers, teachers reported that results from assessments of children’s skills were shared between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers within a school. Only one teacher reported that she received work samples from a Head Start center. Teachers in both focus groups emphasized that they want to develop their own view of the children entering their classroom. They expressed a concern that obtaining information from early care and education providers might bias their views and opinions. One exception to this theme was when a teacher is working with a child with an individualized education plan (IEP).

SUPPORTS AND CHALLENGES IN PREPARING CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL

Center directors and family child care providers mentioned several challenges and supports they face in preparing children for school. These challenges and supports are briefly summarized below.

Challenges	
Parental Expectations	Center directors and family child care providers perceived that parents sometimes have unrealistically high expectations of their children and the child care arrangement, especially when it comes to preparing children academically for kindergarten. Both directors and family child care providers felt that parental pressure to foster pre-academic skills, to the exclusion of other skills, can be detrimental to children.
Lack of Parent Involvement	Despite parents’ high expectations, center directors in particular, expressed difficulty in getting parents involved in their children’s learning. In particular, center directors were disappointed with parents not engaging in home learning activities that were provided. This challenge is noteworthy as kindergarten teachers discussed prior family involvement in a child’s development and learning as a critical factor for supporting children’s school readiness.
Consistency of Children in Care	Center directors in three of the focus groups remarked that many children using a child care subsidy have short spells in care due to parents’ loss of subsidies for a variety of reasons. They discussed the resulting discontinuity in care as a challenge to preparing children for school. Family child care providers did not discuss discontinuity of children in care due to losing subsidies; however, they were more likely to report letting children stay in care when payment from the subsidy system was delayed.
Expense of Learning Materials	Both center directors and family child care providers expressed concern regarding the high cost of learning materials, particularly curricula.
Children’s Emotional Needs	Both center directors and family child care providers were troubled by children’s exposure to traumatic experiences at home, neglectful parent behaviors, and children’s use of violence to solve problems; all of which can impede a providers’ ability to prepare a child for school.

¹⁵ Three teachers had talked with Head Start teachers, and one teacher reported speaking to community-based center teachers or family child care providers to get information about children.

Supports	
Provider Training	<p>Center directors reported continually looking for ways to keep providers fresh and renewed. Training was discussed in all four center director focus groups as a way to support providers and continually improve efforts to foster school readiness in their centers. Though some center directors experienced staff resistance to training; most directors agreed that providers value training opportunities. Maryland’s credentialing program was cited by center directors as an appreciated resource as it pays for providers’ trainings.</p> <p>Family child care providers also expressed an interest in and appreciation for training. However, family child care providers did share their concern that many training sessions are held in the early evenings, which is not feasible for them to attend given the late hour of parent pick-ups. As an alternative to evening trainings, family child care providers suggested more training sessions be offered on Saturdays.</p>
Provider Creativity	<p>Using provider creativity to plan activities, particularly to supplement curricula, was emphasized as a resource in supporting children’s school readiness.</p>

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES, PROGRAMS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In conclusion, this brief reviewed child care providers’ and kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of critical indicators of school readiness; the roles, expectations, and strategies of home- and center-based providers in preparing children for kindergarten; and both challenges and supports home- and center-based providers cite in their work preparing children for kindergarten. 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.

Findings from this study suggest possible content areas for professional development opportunities and support services targeting early care and education providers as well as kindergarten teachers. Center directors, family child care providers, and kindergarten teachers each expressed concerns regarding children who are unable to control their behavior or emotions, oftentimes due to stressful life circumstances or trauma at home. Professional development opportunities that both train early care and education providers and kindergarten teachers about ways to support children with social-emotional delays and connect providers/teachers with supports in the community that are equipped to provide intensive services to support these children are needed. Likewise, family child care providers, center directors, and kindergarten teachers each discussed the importance of parent involvement in supporting children’s learning and development, yet parent involvement was cited as a challenge by members of each of these groups. Training on effective means of developing a positive family-provider/family-teacher relationship, engaging difficult-to-reach families, and offering learning opportunities and activities that are feasible and attractive to parents is warranted. Finally, additional training opportunities on successful transitions to kindergarten and opportunities for networking among early care and education providers and kindergarten teachers could assist with proactive communication among providers and teachers during children’s transition to kindergarten.

Additionally, findings from this study suggest possible extensions to existing programs designed to support quality in early care and education settings in Maryland. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) currently has a credentialing program for child care providers that offers reimbursements for training as well as educational and training standards.¹⁶ Given that few center directors and no family child care providers reported using MSDE-recommended curricula, and that both center directors and family child care providers cited cost as a barrier

¹⁶ To learn more about the MSDE credentialing program, see http://www.msde.md.gov/MSDE/divisions/child_care/credentials/mdcred.

to purchasing curricula and learning materials, reimbursements for MSDE-recommended curricula and curricula-related training is one possible extension to the credentialing program.

Another component of Maryland's early care and education quality improvement system is Maryland's new Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System – Maryland EXCELS¹⁷, which is in its final stages of development. Maryland EXCELS has two primary goals: 1) improving the quality of early care and education through a professional development system that rates provider quality and supports providers in obtaining higher quality ratings, and 2) making information about the quality of care offered by providers readily available to parents. Based on findings from this study, including quality indicators on the EXCELS that assess the use of MSDE-recommended curricula and facilitation of parent involvement in early care and education settings are other possible means for enhancing practices that could facilitate children's school readiness. Likewise, using EXCELS to educate parents as to the definition of school readiness and what skills and abilities are expected of children entering kindergarten may assist parents and early care and education providers in working together to support children's school readiness.

In sum, this research brief presents important information regarding child care providers' and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of critical indicators of school readiness, current strategies being used in center- and home-based care settings to prepare children for school, and challenges experienced by center- and home-based child care providers in these efforts. Recommendations based on findings of this study for extensions of existing programs in Maryland are offered. However, as the presented information is based on findings from a small and geographically-limited sample in the State of Maryland, future research to explore and replicate the findings are warranted as is additional research on the effectiveness of child care providers' efforts to get children ready for school.

¹⁷ To learn more about 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.

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), and two groups with kindergarten teachers (one in each location). 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. Data from the focus group discussions and aggregated findings from the self-administered questionnaires form the basis of this brief.

Center directors and family child care providers were recruited from 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. Information on the demographics of participating center directors and family child care providers are presented in the methodology section of this brief. Among other topics, center directors and family child care providers were asked open-ended questions about their definitions of high quality care and school readiness, and challenges and resources in providing high quality care and preparing children for school.

Kindergarten teachers were recruited from schools located within the same high poverty zip codes as directors and providers. Information on the demographics of participating kindergarten teachers are presented in the methodology section of this brief. Among other topics, kindergarten teachers were asked open-ended questions about their personal experiences and opinions regarding essential components of school readiness and high quality early care and education practices that support children's ability to enter kindergarten ready to learn.

Other research briefs from this study are available at <http://www.mdmnresearchpartnership.com/>. For more information about definitions of school readiness and child care decision making, please see *Defining School Readiness in Maryland: A Multi-Dimensional Perspective* and *Getting into the Black Box: How Do Low-Income Parents Make Choices about Early Care and Education in Maryland?*

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