

Montgomery County Center Director Perspectives:

MSDE Blueprint Pre-Kindergarten Expansion



Sections

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4. Recommended Next Steps for the Alliance

Section 1

**About the Children's
Opportunity Alliance and
this Study**

Children's Opportunity Alliance

Mission

The Children's Opportunity Alliance connects our community to build an equitable, accessible, high-quality, and sustainable early childhood system that narrows disparities and puts all young children on a path to reach their greatest potential.



Children's Opportunity Alliance

Context

The Blueprint Pre-K Expansion is upon us and roughly 208 (or approximately 11%) of full-time pre-k seats for 3- and 4-year-olds are currently located within community-based programs.



Children's Opportunity Alliance

Goal

Align and coordinate county-wide efforts to determine reasonable and incremental goals for community-based program participation in the Blueprint Pre-K Expansion efforts and develop short- and long-term strategies to support that.



Children's Opportunity Alliance

Guiding Questions

1. What do community-based programs need to support their efforts in participating in the Blueprint pre-K expansion?
2. What challenges are community-based programs facing as they consider participation in the Blueprint pre-K expansion?



The Approach



**Limited Survey with
the Organization of
Child Care Directors**



**Interviews with
Grantees and
Non-Grantees**



**Review of Existing
Reports and Data**



Surface Key Themes

Goals of Data Collection



With Pre-K Grantees

... Learn about hopes, opportunities, and challenges directors experience in implementing the Blueprint Pre-K expansion



With Non-Pre-K Expansion Grantees

... Develop an understanding of the "on-ramp" to program readiness



Putting Experiences into Context

... Make sense of the experiences of child care center directors in the context of existing and future investments

Section 2

About the Maryland Pre-K Grant

Maryland Blueprint Pre-K Expansion Efforts

Purpose: Expand access to high-quality, full-day prekindergarten programs for 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds through a mixed delivery system.

Provide 6.5 hours of programming for 180 instructional days:

- at no cost for 4 yos and 3 yos from families with incomes up to 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL)
- using a sliding scale for 4yos from families between 300% -600% FPL

Maryland Pre-Kindergarten Expansion Grant Requirements At a Glance (2023-2024)

Funding	Child Eligibility	Grant Requirements
\$13,000 per student	<p>For 3- and 4-year-olds in households up to 300% of the Federal Poverty Level, and regardless of income:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) children experiencing homelessness 2) children with disabilities 3) children from homes in which English is not the primary language spoken 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lead Teacher must be P-3 certified or have a BA and is enrolled in an alternative preparation program leading to P-3 Certification and must be compensated commensurate with at least the minimum entry salary of the LEA in which the program is located. 2. Assistant Teacher has a preschool CDA, or AA and be enrolled in a program to receive a Preschool CDA, or a plan to obtain CDA by 2025-2026 school year 3. 10:1 student to teacher ratio 4. Class size maximum of 20 students 5. Must be published in EXCELS and priority is given to ratings of 3 or higher, with a plan to achieve level 5

Application Process for Grant Year 2023-2024

Application Period: April 11-June 13, 2023

MCPS Pre-K Enrollment Began March 1



Completed applications include:

Evidence of lead and assistant teacher credentials (documentation of the CDA, AA, BA, and P3 certification or evidence that the assistant teacher or lead teacher are enrolled in a program to obtain the credential, degree, or certification, or a written plan), or a job announcement

- EXCELS rating and description of maintenance
- Accreditation certificate
- Budget + Budget Narrative
- Signed MOU between MSDE, LEA, and private providers
- Plan of Operations
- Staffing, management, and key personnel
- Goals + Outcomes

Section 3

**Montgomery County
Child Care Center
Director Experiences**



Who Did We Hear From?

	Outreach	Declined	No Response	Completed
Grantees (7)	7	1	2	4
Non-Pre-K Grantees	14	4	5	5
OCCD Survey	~20	n/a	n/a	6

* The five directors who declined participation cited time as their constraint, with two directors informing us that they were "in the classroom" due to staff shortages.

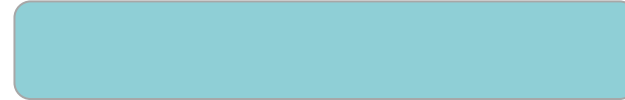


Survey Respondents

Select the statement(s) that best describes you.
(Check all that apply)

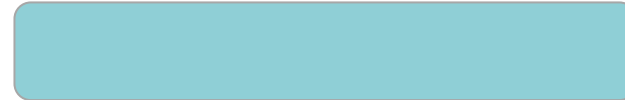
6 responses

I know about the Blueprint Pre-K
Expansion Grant



2 (33.3%)

I do not know about the Blueprint
Pre-K Expansion Grant



2 (33.3%)

I want to learn more about the
Blueprint Pre-K Expansion Grant



1 (16.7%)

I am not interested in learning more
about the Blueprint Pre-K
Expansion Grant



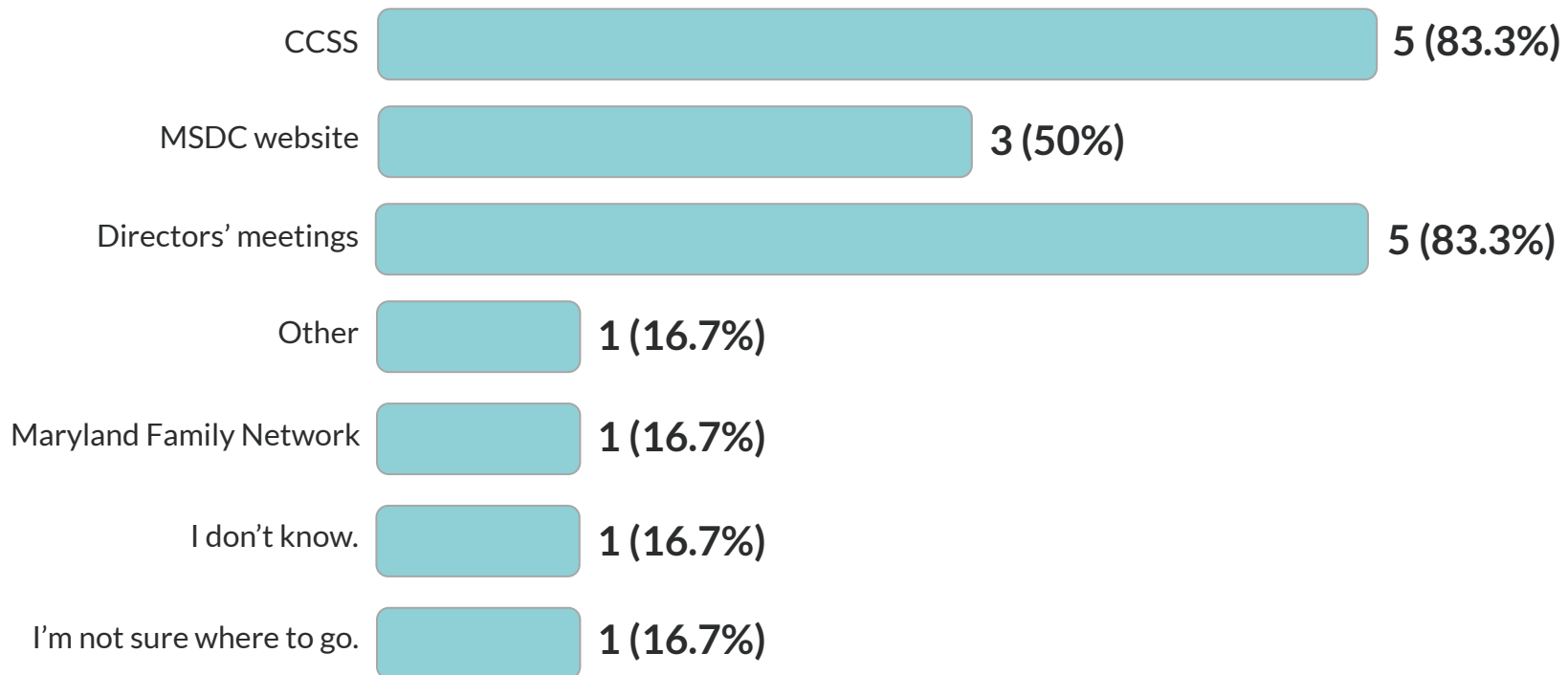
3 (50%)



Survey Respondents

**Where do you go to learn about opportunities like the Pre-K Expansion Grant?
(Check all that apply)**

6 responses





Child Care Center Director Interviews

- Understanding the role child care center directors play
- Surfacing some of the challenges and worries that come with their leadership role (in general and specific to pre-K expansion)
- Surfacing ideas and opportunities to address concerns

Survey Question:

Based on what you know, what supports would you need in order to participate in pre-K expansion efforts?

"From what I understand, pre-K expansion is not open to partnering with centers in ways that would support us to participate. It would be different if we were getting the supports we need but we're really not. For a program to participate, they'd already have to have so many things in place that are simply out of reach for most of us."

"There's no way we can do this. I don't have certified teaching staff. Before we are able to even consider this, we need to work on maintaining what we already have and improving our EXCELS rating so we can be reimbursed higher."

"I don't know about that, but I do know that our programs are hurting. We aren't fully enrolled and barely making it with staff leaving all the time. I spend most of time in the classroom and we are all exhausted [sic]. Totally tired and stressed out."

"1. practical ways to retain staff and funding to raise salaries and benefits 2. coursework to get the certification got to fit working educators [sic]."

Survey Question:

**Additional
comments:**

“We are struggling and pre-k is not what we're thinking about. we need to keep our staff, increase wages, and focus on our kids and families.”

“We need support in every single area of operating a program.”

Thoughts on: The role of the director

“When I took over the school, it was right in the middle of COVID. I feel like I spent the first year trying to get things back on track and spending a lot of time on purely administrative functions - core back office stuff. I feel like this last year has been my year where I've really been able to evolve and focus more on running the school and working with the families and teachers.”

Child Care Director

“I'm a one-person show. I am working on an accreditation that is time intensive. I work basically from 6am to 6pm every day. I take care of QuickBooks, I invoice, I do payroll, I supervise extracurricular activities for kids and families, I do all the ordering, I answer the phone and the door, I respond to parent requests for information, I do curbside drop-off in the morning. It's my favorite time of day. And then when we're short staffed, I'll spend time in the classrooms.”

Child Care Director

Thoughts on: Context for the work

“We’re still trying to crawl our way back to our pre-COVID enrollment numbers. The first few weeks of school, our aftercare program was full and we had to turn away families because we had a staffing constraint. We’re still keeping an eye on the money. It’s not super tight like it was during COVID, but we have to be mindful of where we’re spending the money.”

Child Care Director

“I would say for every 20 calls I get, 19 of them are looking for infant and toddler care. There are just not very many centers that do the younger demographic. It operates in the red. I mean, even after we get that second two-year-old classroom, it’s still going to be operating in the red. Our primary group - the three to six-year-olds is what carries the program.”

Child Care Director

“We work closely to get families access to services. Families come to enroll their children and we help them access whatever programs they can.”

Child Care Director

Thoughts on: Administrative burdens

“Administering the Scholarship and other programs requires a fair chunk of time to track and report. During COVID, we had a lot of children on subsidies. The state tried getting funds out faster by taking a guess at the payment and then later they would reconcile it and pay what they were supposed to. So money was dribbling in and then later we were rolling in funds. I’m not sure how they thought that was going to help.”

Child Care Director

“For so much of the time, I disregard grant opportunities because it’s another thing that’s most likely not going to fit. The description and process to apply for grants is so incredibly institutional. The way information is presented and imagining how it’s going to work feels like a barrier. Sometimes the words don’t even seem to make sense.”

Child Care Director

“We’re just covering our costs. Every year we wonder if grants will be restructured or if we’ll be refunded. For our base rate, we accept everything we can find. We have a full-time nurse, an embedded PEP program for children with disabilities aged three and above, we have therapists, social workers, and of course special education certified teachers. All of this requires a large back-office, which we thankfully have. It’s a lot of work and a lot of moving pieces.”

Child Care Director

Thoughts on: Family outreach and enrollment

"A lot of it is word of mouth. We're on a fairly major road if you're traveling in this direction or live in this area. Signage is right there so people see us. But the majority of families that come to us are word of mouth."

Child Care Director

"Word of mouth and our special services ... No one really tells parents how to evaluate a child care program. I would coach a parent to spend more than just 15 minutes at a busy time to get a sense for the whole feel of a program. Not everyone has an hour. Families aren't making decisions based on quality, they're making decisions based on convenience and if they know someone who knows the place."

Child Care Director

"Families are looking for a sense of belonging. They come to us usually because they want a bilingual program."

Child Care Director

Thoughts on: The families being served

“I think that for families that actually get this opportunity, it is life-changing for their children. We are full. We have found families to enroll, but is it working for families? We don’t provide transportation. We are attached to an MCPS early childhood center and our kids can’t use their bus because of insurance, liability, and licensing issues. I’ve tried. We only have 20 slots. So I think, again, for the families who can get in, it’s life changing. But is it equitable?”

Child Care Director

“The Pre-K expansion program is designed for a six and a half hour day. That’s not enough time for working families. The community we serve has less resources and are experiencing things that require specialized care. Our specialty is education, but there is so much need. So families come for child care and then we’re helping them apply for other services.

Child Care Director

“Children who receive the Scholarship are in the same classroom as the children in slots funded by the Pre-K Expansion Grant. But the Scholarship kids can stay for a full day and all year. So when people are calling, I tell them they should apply for the Scholarship because they get a longer day.”

Child Care Director

Thoughts on: What is preventing you from applying for the grant?

“The requirements are a little scary to me. Like I said, it's hard to find staff with those specific criteria. I think it's going to be very, very difficult.

Child Care Director

“I saw the grant RFPs go out and then I looked at how I could make it work. It didn't seem like a good fit. They asked for educators to have four year degrees. They asked for the classroom space to be dedicated. I can't promise that salary before I know I have the children to enroll. So I may or may not have a full class. That just doesn't seem like a great place to start.”

Child Care Director

“The funding for the Blueprint is insufficient. It doesn't cover the cost associated with providing quality care and instruction, so to think that a private provider can subsidize a public good is unrealistic.”

Child Care Director

Thoughts on: The Pre-K Grant application process

“I sent in a report but I didn't submit it correctly. When we reapplied for the grant, we had to use the long form. It was a waste of time. It was disrespectful to our agency. We are one of the few CBOs who prioritize children with delays, disabilities, and who are medically fragile. Putting us through extra hoops is insulting.”

Child Care Director

“This past grant application season was probably the most trying. It was so late when the application came out and there had been so much upheaval within MSDE that it spilled over into the grant process. But at the same time, we could see that they were trying to improve the process by clarifying what it was that they were looking for.”

Child Care Director

“I can't even tell you how difficult it is. It took me almost four weeks to complete it. The people in the public school systems know the language and terminology. I had to look at the requirements for parent engagement and take the beautiful community building we do here and translate it to fit the requirements. I can't even fathom what a family daycare or smaller program would have to do to complete this.”

Child Care Director

Thoughts on: The possibility of partnering with MCPS

“There’s a general disrespect for child care providers baked into Montgomery County Public Schools. In my experience, they don’t really want community partners.”

Child Care Director

“MCPS looks at child care as a nuisance. They don’t look at their buildings as places for community programs. Do they look to child care programs as a partner? No. We’re there to serve their priorities. ”

Child Care Director

Thoughts on: Challenges with the Pre-K grant

“We have struggled to keep a qualified staff. I have been fortunate in the people I've been able to hire and that's due to the reputation of our program. But still, if qualified staff don't exist, you can't hire them. The workforce shortage is impacting us.”

Child Care Director

“One of the biggest challenges is enrolling children. There's no forward thinking on enrolling before August and we have a lot of children who don't enroll until September or early October.”

Child Care Director

“I need to fundraise at least \$7,000 per child to fully cover the cost of running this program. And that doesn't include the \$17,000 I spend to train my teachers or the cost of hiring substitutes.”

Child Care Director

Thoughts on: Additional supports from MCPS

“We’ve bonded and spent time together to get things done. Our coordinator is incredible and goes above and beyond to help us. I can pick up the phone and call her anytime.”

Child Care Director

“Last spring was the first year we were invited to an open house enrollment activity. We got one referral because the family’s local school had no slots left. This was the first time I’ve known about a referral process. ”

Child Care Director

“We have monthly meetings with the MCPS pre-K person to share out information. MCPS shares professional development and resources.”

Child Care Director

Thoughts on: The requirements for staff

“We’re all in agreement that this is important to provide a greater number of children the opportunity to be preschool. The teacher certification is a real barrier.”

Child Care Director

“We might offer the same money - salary - as the schools, but we don't offer the same long term advancement and security that work in MCPS offers. We don't offer the same benefits. We can't really compete with that.”

Child Care Director

“We have zero staff with a CDA. And we have probably 3% of staff with some kind of degree. The rest are all qualified to be teachers through the 90-hour coursework required by Maryland. It’s already proven to be extremely challenging to hire early educators with these qualifications, let alone certified teachers.”

Child Care Director

“There was a point where we had three teachers doing their practicum and getting ready to get the certification. Two things happened: one, they got their certification and they moved on to public schools, and two, it was too overwhelming and after trying to complete it, one said, 'I can't do this, this is too much' and she left.”

Child Care Director

The Dilemma

“For child care operators, it's a high cost to get to high quality. We can't cut corners anywhere. The system is broken and things like pre-K expansion in the Blueprint help families with affordability. The side it doesn't really deal with is getting teachers the living wage they need and the programs the kind of support they need to secure both that teacher and the guarantee that the program will enroll the kids.”

- Child Care Center Director

Suggested solutions and recommendations

“The state could **provide more variances as it relates to educators meeting certification requirements**. They’ve done it in school systems but they don’t relax things for child care. We’re held to a different standard. We need **recognition for the work we are doing and flexibility so we can continue.**”

Child Care Director

“There’s got to be a way to **bring together providers on some kind of periodic basis to have their voice, experiences, and ideas included in the planning and decision-making process**. The biggest challenge is that there’s the state and the state is going to do what they want to do. They’re the ones calling the shots and they’re not open to feedback.”

Child Care Director

“If the **salary portion of the teachers was picked up by MCPS** and they were sending a teacher to the community-based program, that would help. The teacher earns a good wage and has whatever qualification is approved by MCPS and they’re working in an adjunct facility.”

Child Care Director

“Montgomery College did offer a job fair or maybe they still do. But that's for larger entities to take advantage of that kind of job fair. The teacher leads I've hired we've had for last three years. But **it would be great if there were big hiring fairs that showed how much this industry values its educators** and then whoever is holding the fair had a database of educators matched with jobs or still looking. I could use that list maybe not to hire right now but for substitutes.”

Child Care Director

“The county and the state could **fund facility maintenance more adequately**. A part of delivering quality early care and education is providing a high quality environment and they never have the funds.

Child Care Director

“Child care is so hyper local, that if there aren't children and families within a mile of you, chances are they're not getting to you. Right now, there's no **single form that families fill out to enroll in programs**. I think that if families learn about a program, they're going to go and fill out whatever paperwork, prove eligibility and then wait.”

Child Care Director

“Having a person that we can go to is really important. I'm just hearing things on Facebook through random people, which is not efficient. **Having a liaison or somebody that you can go to** would be beneficial to learn about the Pre-K program or other funding opportunities, and anything else related to operating a program.”

Child Care Director

High-Level Themes

The Pre-K grants pose challenges because Directors are:

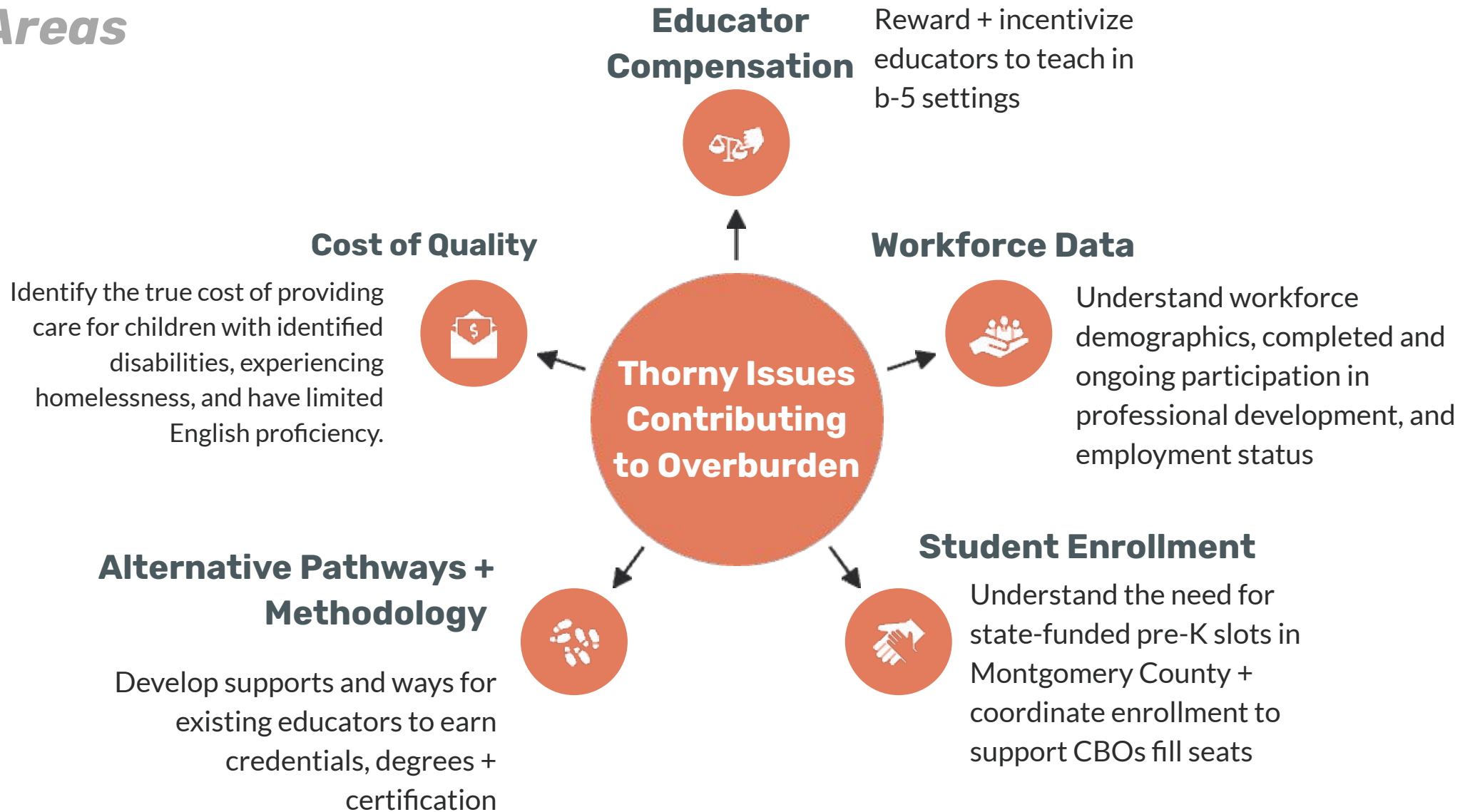
1. Overburdened by administrative tasks.

2. Struggling to find qualified educators.

3. Expending great efforts to cover the cost of quality care.

High-Level Themes

Key Areas



Section 4

Recommended Next Steps for Children's Opportunity Alliance

Recommended Next Step: Foster consensus around a clear goal

- Refresh projections on the number of seats needed in Montgomery County that are based on income eligibility, the number of dual-language learners, children experiencing homelessness, and the number of children with disabilities
- Galvanize diverse community-wide stakeholders around setting and owning a collective goal

Family Income Tier	Age (yrs)	Estimated Pop. Size
Tier 1: 0 – 300% FPL	4	4,455
	3	4,455
	Running total: 8,910	
Tier 2: 301% FPL – 600% FPL (sliding scale fee)	4	4,455
	3	4,455
	Running total: 17,820	
Tier 3: >600% FPL (full pay) *up to 80% of total pop.	4	2,090
	3	2,090
	Running total: 22,000	

Recommendation: Clear goal (continued)

How many seats does Montgomery County need?

	Population Served	Total Seats Needed	Community Share (50%)
Required by state legislation	Tier 1 4yos	4,455	2,228
	Tier 1 4yos & 3yos	8,910	4,455
	Tier 1 + Tier 2 4yos	13,365	6,683
Optional	Tier 1 + Tier 2	17,820	8,910
	Universal/All 3 Tiers	22,000	11,000

Recommended Next Step: Collect more data

- Serve on the ECEI/DHHS project teams to ensure data that would support Blueprint strategy development is included in these three important studies:
 - Supply & Demand
 - Cost of Quality
 - Workforce Landscape & Compensation Cost Model
- Conduct qualitative interviews with family child care providers
- Determine the appropriate cadence for seeking continued feedback from providers over the 10-year Blueprint rollout



Recommended Next Step: Coordinate with and support existing efforts

- Continue to support the existing ECEI workgroup, 'Public Education and Community-Based ECE Partnerships', as it works to increase the number of community based seats through a focus on application support, outreach, and enrollment supports.
- As DHHS hires a program coordinator focused on Blueprint outreach, coordinate outreach strategy.
- Support the MCPS team as they engage, collect data from, and strengthen the cohort of existing grantees.

“Running an infant to Pre-K program doesn't work unless you have a lot of four year olds right in your area just walking distance away. And if the school systems start weaning those away from child care providers - enrolling all the kids because they offer transportation and it's more convenient if the family has older kids, it's going to break the system even more. The economics just don't work to provide high quality care for infants and toddlers. You can't make money or even break even caring for infants and toddlers. So for child care providers, we need to be able to grow our Pre-K programs.”

Recommended Next Step: Develop system-level recommendations to increase the number of eligible providers

- The current baseline of how many providers meet the strict and high eligibility criteria to take advantage of the Blueprint grants is unknown.
- Seek and pilot local options for breaking down barriers, such as:
 - improving EXCELS rating
 - recruiting qualified educators and/or exploring alternative certification pathways
 - reducing the administrative burden
 - covering the true cost of care
 - coordinated enrollment of students

“Like I said, it's hard to find staff with those specific criteria. Most staff who are here and have their CDA or have their AA, most of them aren't looking to do more than that. A lot of my staff here are older and this is where they are comfortable. They don't want to have to go back to school and they've been doing this work for more than 20-30 years. So even trying to say that one of my current staff would be able to maybe become a certified Pre-K teacher, I don't foresee that.”

Recommended Next Step: Generate state advocacy agenda

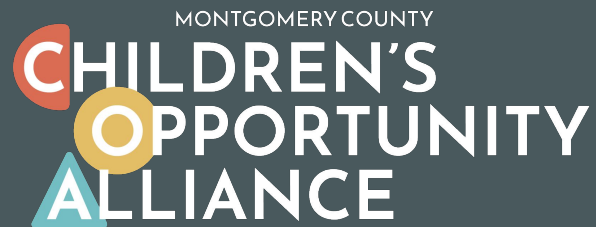
“In terms of addressing the challenges we face – funding issues, infrastructure – MCPS doesn’t do much to advocate for changes. I don’t know how much the schools are involved in the early care and education at the state level.”

Work with partners to generate recommendations to the State and separate the suggestions by those controlled by:

- MSDE
- AIB
- Legislators

Thank You!

mocochildren.org



The Montgomery County Children's Opportunity Alliance is the Early Care and Education Coordinating Entity for Montgomery County, MD.