

# EXPANDING PRE-K IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS WILL REQUIRE EXPANDING THE PRE-K TEACHER WORKFORCE. BUT HOW, AND BY HOW MUCH?

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## CENTRAL QUESTIONS

**How many Pre-K teachers and teaching assistants will districts need to meet Maryland’s Pre-K expansion goals?**

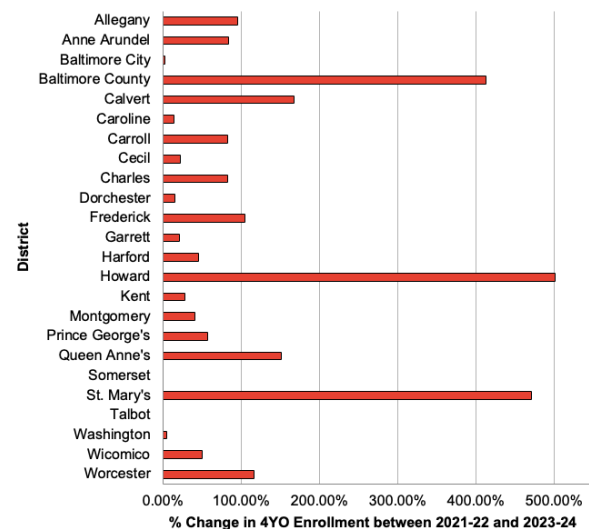
**How will districts recruit them?**

Participation in high-quality Pre-K is associated with short- and long-term academic, social, economic, and health benefits for children—particularly children in low-income families.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, expanding Pre-K is a primary goal of Maryland’s statewide, multi-billion-dollar reform, the [Blueprint for Maryland’s Future](#), which passed in 2021. Through the Blueprint, Maryland will offer a mixed-delivery system in which both public schools and private providers offer state-funded Pre-K. The legislation mandates that Pre-K be available cost-free to all 4-year-olds in families with an income at or below 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL) by 2025-26 and to all 3-year-olds in families with an income at or below 300% of the FPL by 2031-32.<sup>2</sup> It also mandates that Pre-K be available on a sliding pay scale to children in families with an income between 301-600% of the FPL beginning in 2024-25.<sup>3</sup>

Pre-K expansion will mean serving hundreds more children in just a few years. In their 2023 Blueprint implementation plans, most of Maryland’s 24 districts projected dramatic growth in 4-year-old enrollment between 2021-22 and 2023-24 (Figure 1); those that did not (e.g., Baltimore City) already offer Pre-K for all or most 4-year-olds. In their 2024 implementation plans, many districts noted that they had expanded Pre-K for 4-year-olds but some had not yet begun to serve 3-year-olds. Enrollment is likely to grow even more by 2025-26, when districts must serve all 4-year-olds in low-income families, and by 2031-32, when districts must serve all 3-year-olds in low-income families.

The Blueprint also brings strict personnel requirements for Pre-K classrooms, including a student-teacher ratio of 10:1, a maximum of 20 children per classroom, and at least one teacher certified in early childhood education and one teaching assistant in every classroom.<sup>4</sup> These requirements, coupled with enrollment growth, suggest that **expanding Pre-K will require expanding the Pre-K teacher workforce**. In public school districts—the focus of this brief—that means increasing numbers of *Pre-K teachers*, who must be state certified in early childhood education or have a bachelor’s degree and be pursuing certification through an approved alternative preparation program, and *Pre-K teaching assistants (TAs)*, who must have a Child Development Associate (CDA) or associate’s degree. These educator requirements will go into effect in 2026-27.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1. Percent Change in Four-Year-Old Enrollment between 2021-22 and 2023-24**



Source: Districts’ 2023 Blueprint implementation plans.

**About this Brief.** The University of Maryland College of Education’s **Maryland Equity Project (MEP)** seeks to improve public education through research that supports an informed public policy debate about the quality and distribution of educational opportunities in Maryland and nationally. This brief is one in a series on **The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future**—a significant statewide investment to transform Maryland’s public schools in service of educational equity. The purpose of this brief series is to support districts in their efforts to plan and implement Blueprint initiatives through information-sharing and research-based recommendations.

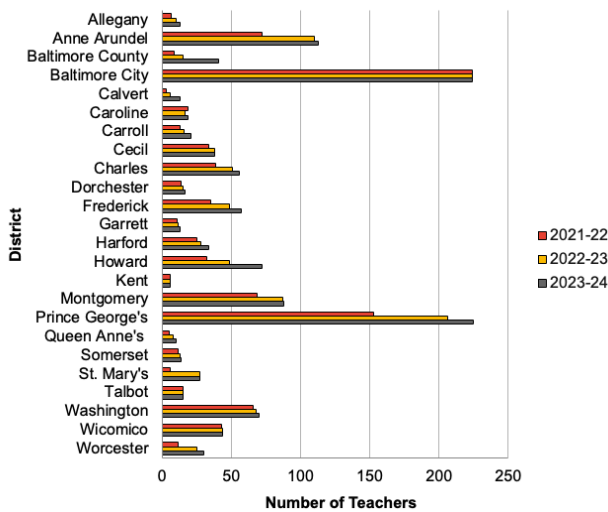
This brief draws on a review of Maryland districts’ 2023 and 2024 Blueprint implementation plans (described in a later section) to explore how many new teachers and TAs districts will need to meet Maryland’s Pre-K expansion goals, as well as how districts are expanding their Pre-K teacher workforces. We focus on the scope of and strategies for expanding the Pre-K teaching workforce within school districts because this area was the primary focus of districts’ implementation plans.

## KEY FINDINGS

**Districts say staffing presents a challenge for Pre-K expansion, but the scope and severity of this challenge is unclear.**

When asked in their 2023 implementation plans about the challenges they were facing with expanding Pre-K, 15 out of 24 districts cited staffing. Many echoed this challenge in their 2024 plans. Districts described needing more teachers and TAs generally but also more staff with specific areas of expertise, like early childhood special education.

**Figure 2. Number of Pre-K Teachers by District from 2021-22 to 2023-24**

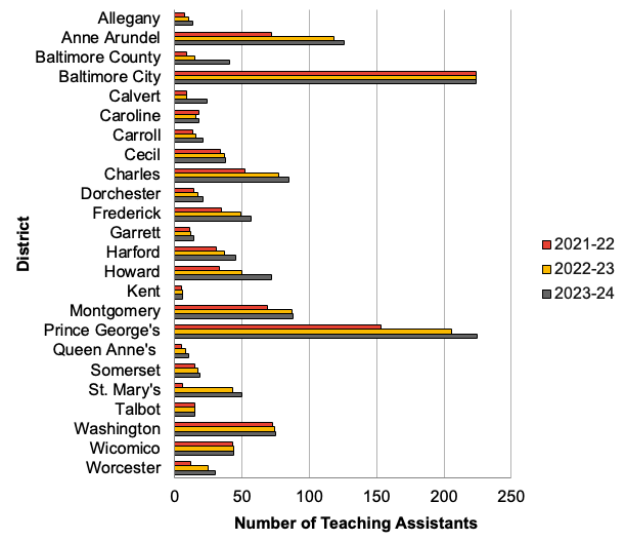


Source: Districts’ 2023 Blueprint implementation plans.

In their 2023 plans, districts were also required to report the number of teachers and TAs needed to accommodate student enrollment changes between 2021-22 and 2023-24 (Figures 2, 3), as well as teacher and TA vacancies (Appendix A). But while most districts reported increases in the number of teachers and TAs required, few reported

vacancies. Although districts were not asked to project vacancies in the years when Pre-K expansion is scheduled to take effect—and, thus, when they will have to offer Pre-K to substantially more students—this finding appears inconsistent with their statements that staffing is a challenge for Pre-K expansion *and* with the fact that early childhood certification is one of the highest shortage areas in the state.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 3. Number of Pre-K Teaching Assistants by District from 2021-22 to 2023-24**



Source: Districts’ 2023 Blueprint implementation plans.

**While the specifics of staffing challenges remain to be seen, districts described several strategies to expand their Pre-K teaching workforces.**

Districts frequently described **generalized approaches to recruiting Pre-K teachers and TAs**, like advertising at career fairs and on their websites and social media platforms. For example, many districts attended recruitment events at local and out-of-state universities, including community colleges and Historically Black Colleges and Universities, with the hopes of expanding and diversifying their teacher workforces.

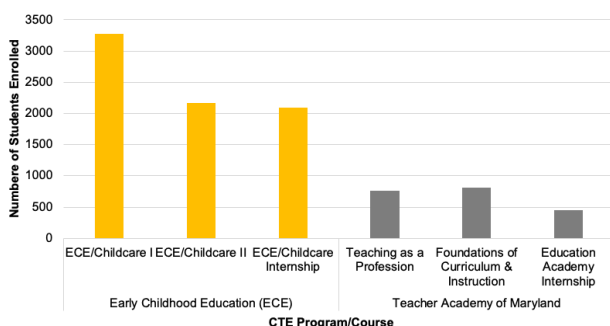
Some districts described **TAs as a promising pool of prospective Pre-K teachers**, but most are focusing on helping Pre-K TAs earn new credentials that the Blueprint will soon require. Pre-K TAs in Maryland are currently required to hold at least a high school degree or high school equivalency certificate, but must hold a Child Development

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Associate (CDA) credential or an associate's degree by 2026-27.<sup>7</sup> The implementation plans asked districts to explain how they will support TAs in meeting these requirements, so most districts' plans focused on strategies to increase and support TAs' enrollment in CDA coursework (e.g., cohort models, tuition reimbursement). A few districts also described supporting TAs to earn a bachelor's degree or teaching certificate, but these efforts were not specific to the Pre-K teacher workforce.

Districts also described **high schoolers enrolled in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Teacher Academy of Maryland (TAM) Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs as a large source of future Pre-K teachers and TAs.** In 2022, the ECE program, which is designed for students to earn a CDA, enrolled drastically more students than the TAM program, which is designed to prepare students to earn PK-12 teacher certification<sup>8</sup> (Figure 4). Given its specificity, the ECE program has the potential to supply districts with many Pre-K TAs who will meet the Blueprint's certification requirements. Some districts, like Carroll County Public Schools, even offer an open contract for graduates to work as a TA in the district. Carroll and others are also working towards approval for a youth apprenticeship program that allows students in the ECE program to earn credit while working as a Pre-K TA in the district. TAM, on the other hand, may be a less reliable source of Pre-K teachers—not only because of its relatively small enrollment but also because graduates could pursue certification in any PK-12 area (if they choose to pursue it at all).

**Figure 4. 2022 Enrollment in ECE and TAM CTE Courses**



**Source:** Maryland State Department of Education, Division of College and Career Readiness (n.d.).<sup>9</sup>

## RESEARCH METHODS

This brief draws on a qualitative analysis of publicly available documents describing efforts to implement Blueprint initiatives and the challenges with doing so. Our primary sources were districts' 2023 and 2024 [implementation plans](#), which they were required to complete and submit to the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). We also reviewed districts' [responses to AIB and MSDE feedback](#) on these plans and [reports districts submitted to the AIB regarding implementation progress](#). Our team continues to update this research process as additional information is made available by the AIB. This brief draws on data that address districts' Pre-K expansion efforts, which we analyzed using both deductive codes derived from questions the implementation plans asked of districts (e.g., challenges with expanding Pre-K) and inductive codes derived from a preliminary review of the data (e.g., staffing challenges).

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

**Understanding the scope and severity of Pre-K staffing issues is critical to addressing them.**

Given the complexity of expanding Pre-K, it is not surprising that the scope and severity of districts' Pre-K staffing issues are unclear. Although the Blueprint mandates Pre-K expansion through a mixed-delivery system that involves both school districts and private providers, many private providers have been hesitant to participate.<sup>10</sup> Because this process is ongoing, districts cannot be certain how many Pre-K seats private providers will provide and, consequently, how many Pre-K seats *they* will need to provide. This context makes it difficult, if not impossible, for districts to predict how many Pre-K teachers and TAs they will need come 2025-26 and 2031-32—information that districts must have in order to prepare for and meet their forthcoming Pre-K staffing needs.

**Determine how many Pre-K TAs are actually interested in becoming teachers.**

In line with districts' current recruitment efforts, research suggests that TAs are an important group to recruit into teacher roles.<sup>11</sup> But not all TAs *want* to become teachers.<sup>12</sup>

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Consequently, districts' recruitment efforts should involve surveys or other modes of data collection to identify which Pre-K TAs are interested in pursuing a teacher role, so recruitment efforts may be targeted to them. This strategy pairs well with surveys that districts like Kent and Washington County Public Schools are already disseminating to gauge Pre-K TAs' interest in earning a CDA or associate's degree.

### Focus on replenishing pools of prospective Pre-K TAs.

As districts draw current TAs into Pre-K teacher roles, their Pre-K TA workforce is likely to shrink. Thus, districts should simultaneously recruit new TAs to fill vacant positions and, as they expand Pre-K offerings, to fill new positions. One reliable Pre-K TA pipeline is the ECE CTE program for high schoolers, which many districts are already tapping into. Given the popularity of the ECE program—as indicated by its high enrollment numbers—districts could expand offerings (if they have not done so already). Prince George's County Public Schools, for example, is planning to expand its program to two additional high schools in the coming years.

At the same time, districts should develop strategies to recruit students *into* the ECE and TAM CTE programs. Districts may follow the lead of St. Mary's County Public Schools, whose Teacher Academy Potential Scholars (TAPS) program focuses on fostering interest in teaching among K-8 students and encouraging them to enroll in TAM once they reach high school. Districts might also consider conducting surveys or focus groups of their high schoolers to better understand why they might choose to enroll (or not) in the ECE or TAM programs and what recruitment tactics or program modifications would encourage them to do so.

Districts could also expand their Pre-K TA pools by partnering with external programs supporting individuals to earn their CDA. In 2023, the Maryland State Department of Education awarded grant funds to several programs focused on growing the ECE teacher workforce.<sup>13</sup> One such program is the Maryland Early EdCorp Registered Apprentice Program, in which individuals engage in paid on-the-job training while completing their CDA.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Barnett, W. S., & Jung, K. (2021). Effects of New Jersey's Abbott preschool program on children's achievement, grade retention, and special education through tenth grade. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 56, 248-259.

Bassok, D., & Engel, M. (2019). Early childhood education at scale: Lessons from research for policy and practice. *AERA Open*, 5(1), 1-7. Cascio, E. U., & Schanzenbach, D. W. (2013). The impacts of expanding access to high-quality preschool education. (National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 19735).

<sup>2</sup> Accountability and Implementation Board (2022). [Blueprint for Maryland's future: Initial comprehensive implementation plan](#).

<sup>3</sup> Maryland State Department of Education (2024). [Prekindergarten sliding scale guidance](#).

<sup>4</sup> Maryland State Education Association (n.d.). [Early childhood education](#).

<sup>5</sup> Ford, W. J. (2023, June 19). [Breaking down the Blueprint: Major changes ahead as Maryland plans dramatic expansion of early childhood education](#). *Maryland Matters*.

<sup>6</sup> Maryland State Department of Education (2022). [Maryland's teacher workforce: Supply, demand, and diversity](#).

<sup>7</sup> Maryland State Education Association (n.d.). Ford (2023).

<sup>8</sup> Maryland State Department of Education (2021). [Maryland Career & Technical Education programs of study](#).

<sup>9</sup> Maryland State Department of Education, Division of College and Career Readiness (n.d.). [Participant enrollment in Maryland Public Schools](#).

<sup>10</sup> Friedman, M. & Weger, N. (2024, March 11). [Maryland's education 'Blueprint' struggles to expand pre-K](#). *MoCo360*.

<sup>11</sup> Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). [Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color](#). Learning Policy Institute. Gist, C. D., Bianco, M., & Lynn, M. (2019). Examining Grow Your Own programs across the teacher development continuum: Mining research on teachers of color and nontraditional educator pipelines. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(1), 13-25.

<sup>12</sup> Will, M. (2022, June 15). [Paraprofessionals: As the 'backbones' of the classroom, they get low pay, little support](#). *Education Week*.

<sup>13</sup> Maryland State Department of Education (2023, April 12). [MSDE awards more than \\$23 million to lay the groundwork to bolster and expand Maryland's early childhood education and childcare communities](#).

<sup>14</sup> University of Maryland College of Education (2024, April 5). [UMD center establishes Maryland's first early childhood educator registered apprenticeship](#).

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## Endnotes

Appendix A

Table 1A. Number of Teacher and TA Vacancies by District from 2021-22 to 2023-24

District	2021-22		2022-23		2023-24	
	Teacher	TA	Teacher	TA	Teacher	TA
Allegany	0	0	0	0	0	0
Anne Arundel	0	0	1	0	0	0
Baltimore County	0	0	0	0	0	0
Baltimore City	7	5	22	8	10	7
Calvert	0	0	0	0	1	15
Caroline	0	0	0	0	0	0
Carroll	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cecil	0	0	0	0	0	0
Charles	1	8	1	3	N/A	N/A
Dorchester	0	0	1	2	3	6
Frederick	0	0	0	0	8	8
Garrett	?	?	?	?	1	1
Harford	0	0	0	0	N/A	N/A
Howard	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kent	0	0	0	0	0	0
Montgomery	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prince George's	?	20	?	27	?	30
Queen Anne's	0	0	0	0	1	1
Somerset	0	0	0	1	0	0
St. Mary's	0	0	0	3	0	0
Talbot	0	1	0	0	N/A	N/A
Washington	0	0	0	2	0	?
Wicomico	0	1	0	0	0	0
Worcester	0	0	0	0	5	5

Source: Districts' 2023 Blueprint implementation plans.

Note: Although districts were required to report vacancies, some did not report a number. We include "N/A" where districts did so and report "?" where districts did not provide a value.

