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How are Maryland districts expanding pre-K through a mixed delivery system?

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In Maryland, mixed delivery is the chosen path for pre-K expansion.

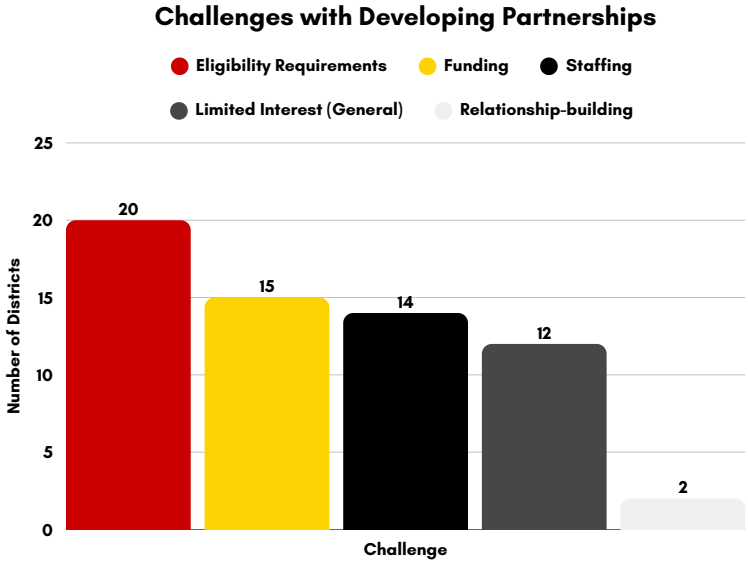
Maryland is prioritizing pre-K expansion through its comprehensive education reform, the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The Blueprint mandates that pre-K be made available cost-free to all four-year-olds whose family income level is at or below 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL) by 2025-26 and to all three-year-olds whose family income level is at or below 300% of the FPL by 2031-32. As of 2024-25, pre-K must also be available on a sliding pay scale to families with an income between 301-600% of the FPL. Under the Blueprint, pre-K expansion must be achieved through a mixed delivery system in which public schools and private providers collaborate to offer state-funded services. The legislation outlines public-private provider ratios by which districts must abide (or apply for a waiver). Initial Blueprint legislation specified that private providers must provide at least 30% of pre-K slots in each county.[1] During the 2024 legislative session, lawmakers updated the ratio to 10%, to increase by 10 percentage points each year for a ratio of 50% from 2028-29 onward.[2]

Expanding pre-K—and doing so through a mixed delivery system—aligns with evidence that pre-K has generally positive effects on achievement,[3] particularly for children from low-income families,[4] and that a mixed delivery system can add much-needed capacity (e.g., staffing, building space), contribute to diversity in the pre-K teaching workforce,[5] and offer an expanded choice set for parents.[6] But academic literature also suggests that mixed delivery systems are challenging to implement, due to difficulties building relationships across pre-K sectors,[7] a lack of systemic cohesion, and sector differences in teacher salaries and credential requirements.[8]

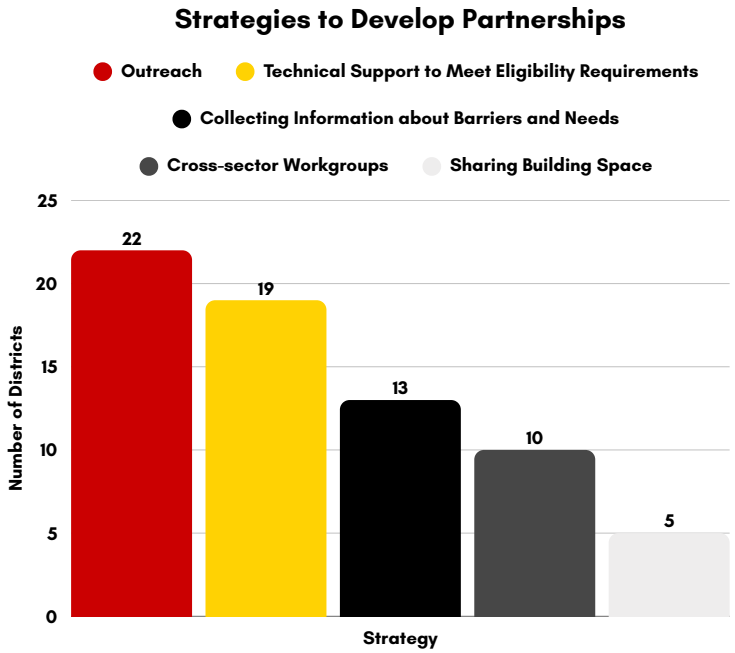
In May 2024, Maryland's 24 school districts submitted implementation plans detailing how they were working with private pre-K providers to expand pre-K access through a mixed delivery system. This brief explores districts' stated challenges with and strategies for developing partnerships with private providers—a critical factor in the success of the state's mixed delivery system. We highlight examples of strategies we have identified as most promising, based on their alignment with recommendations from academic literature.

Despite ample challenges, districts are making an effort to partner with private providers—and their strategies are promising.

All districts reported at least one challenge related to developing partnerships with private providers—most commonly, eligibility requirements, which many providers did not fulfill; funding, including delays with reimbursement from the state; and staffing, including a lack of qualified teachers. These challenges generally reflect limited private provider participation. As one district put it, private providers are "reluctant to engage" with districts and take part in the mixed delivery system.



About this Brief. Our research team reviewed Maryland districts' 2024 Blueprint implementation plans, which were submitted to the Accountability and Implementation Board and are publicly available, to better understand districts' challenges with and strategies for developing partnerships with private pre-K providers. Comprehensive findings from our analysis are detailed in this slide deck.



At the same time, all districts were also engaging in strategies to develop partnerships. The most frequently discussed strategies involved outreach to private providers (e.g., information sessions, site visits) and technical support to help providers meet eligibility requirements, including assistance with grant writing. For the most part, these strategies were aligned with challenges districts had identified themselves and/or with recommendations from the academic literature, which include engaging in relationship-building efforts, establishing means for cross-sector collaboration, and helping private providers acquire adequate funding.[9] In the following sections, we highlight examples of particularly promising partnership-development efforts.

Providing Technical Assistance to Private Providers in Baltimore City

Baltimore City Public Schools described a series of encouraging efforts to support private providers' efforts to become eligible for and earn state funding. The district noted that they created a new staff position "solely focused on successful mixed delivery" that would "be dedicated to … providing direct technical assistance to private providers." Specific tasks for this new staff member included supporting private providers with grant writing; teacher certification and accreditation, which played a role in their eligibility to participate in the mixed delivery system; and business development.

Building Relationships with and identifying Key Barriers for Private Providers in Queen Anne's County

Queen Anne's County Public Schools discussed an innovative effort to partner with local private providers by collaborating with a facilitator charged with conducting a "comprehensive exploration of successful models of collaboration between public schools and private providers." This task would involve conversations (e.g., focus groups, interviews) with prospective private providers, focused on "gaug[ing] interest in establishing partnerships, while also addressing pertinent queries and concerns." This strategy could shed light on key barriers to private provider participation and aid in relationship-building across sectors.

Expanding Capacity in Worcester County

Like most other districts, Worcester County Public Schools (WCPS) described private providers' limited interest in partnering. While continuing to pursue partnerships, the district is also "pushing through this barrier" by opening its own childcare center—the "Nest Early Learning Center"—within Worcester Technical High School. WCPS also noted that it is partnering with the Early Childhood Career and Technical Education program to run this center. Thus, in addition to providing additional pre-K capacity, this center also appears to be developing an early childhood educator pipeline.

Overall, these examples illustrate how some districts are pursuing promising strategies to offer a mixed delivery system within the constraints of limited private provider participation. It is important to note, however, that the most promising strategies to overcome this core challenge—for example, reconsidering what public-private ratios are feasible and providing additional funding to incentivize and support private provider participation—may be beyond districts' purview and require additional state investment.

Endnotes

[1] Maryland General Assembly (2020). House Bill 1300. Blueprint for Maryland's Future: Implementation.

[2] Wright (2024). *Blueprint spotlight: Pre-K mixed delivery implementation update.* Maryland State Department of Education.

[3] 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.

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[6] McCormick, M. P., Mattera, S. K., Maier, M. F., Xia, S., Jacob, R., & Morris, P. A. (2022). Different settings, different patterns of impacts: Effects of a Pre-K math intervention in a mixed-delivery system. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 58*, 136–154.

[7] Stephens, S. A. (2014). *Community-level challenges in implementing a mixed delivery prekindergarten system: A brief review of research and field experience*. (Policy Brief). Center for Assessment and Policy Development.

[8] Reid, J. L., Melvin, S. A., Kagan, S. L., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2019). Building a unified system for universal Pre-K: The case of New York City. *Children and Youth Services Review, 100*, 191–205.

[9] Garver et al. (2023); Stephens (2014)