



Including Home-Based Family Child Care Programs into state's Pre-K Expansion: Lessons Learned from Maryland

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In Maryland, home-based child care educators play a crucial role in providing personalized and flexible care options that benefit thousands of children and families. According to the Maryland State Department of Education, there are **over 6,500 licensed child care programs in the state**, serving approximately **52,000 children in a home-based setting**.

Home-based child care, also known as family child care (FCC), is offered in caregivers' homes for small groups of children. It provides unique advantages such as mixed-age groups, diverse cultural environments, and flexible hours to accommodate the needs of working families. Integrating these programs into the state-funded pre-K system will ensure that all children have access to the high-quality early education experiences they deserve, regardless of their setting.

Maryland's leadership in early childhood education is demonstrated through the state's inclusive child care policies and innovative programs, setting a standard for other states looking to incorporate family child care into their own pre-K systems. To achieve this, states must prioritize adopting policies that fully support and recognize the unique benefits of home-based care. Based on our experience as educators in Maryland, we propose the following steps to effectively incorporate home-based child care programs:

- **Professional Development Programs:** Implement professional development programs tailored for family child care educators. These programs should offer training on managing mixed-age groups, fostering engaging learning environments in smaller settings, and maximizing scheduling flexibility.
- **Cultural Competency Training:** Provide training for family child care educators and state-level administrators to understand and respect diverse cultural backgrounds. This may include sharing strategies for fostering inclusive environments, building effective cross-cultural communications, and integrating culturally responsive practices into curriculum and care.
- **Resource Sharing and Networking:** Facilitate opportunities for family child care educators to connect, share resources, and exchange best practices through online forums, local meet-ups, and mentorship programs where experienced providers can support newcomers to the field.

¹ Maryland State Department of Education Resource: Division of Early Childhood; Office of Child Care, 2024
[<https://www.checkccmd.org/SearchResults.aspx?ft=&fn=&sn=&z=&c=&co=>]

- **Financial Support and Incentives:** Offer financial support and incentives to encourage family child care educators' participation in professional development and help offset costs associated with maintaining high-quality programs. This includes offering scholarships for training programs, grants for educational materials and supplies, and reimbursement for participating in accreditation processes.
- **Policy and Regulatory Support:** Advocate for policies and regulations that support the unique characteristics of family child care programs. This includes revising licensing standards to accommodate smaller group sizes and flexible scheduling arrangements, as well as providing exemptions for educators from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- **Collaboration with Community Organizations:** Partner with community organizations and cultural institutions to enrich the cultural relevance of family child care programs. Introduce culturally diverse books, toys, and materials into programs, invite guest speakers or performers from various backgrounds to engage children and families, and arrange field trips to culturally significant sites or events.

By implementing these recommendations, Maryland and other states can create successful pathways to better support family child care educators and their programs.

Provide Inclusive and Transparent Process for FCC Educators to Offer Pre-K in their Programs

The Family Childcare Alliance of Maryland's ASPIRE program stands out as a leading network advocating for the integration of family child care into the state's pre-K system. ASPIRE specifically supports educators entering Maryland's state-funded pre-K system with the goal to ensure universal access by 2031. They provide tailored training for home-based pre-K, focusing on creating personalized learning experiences.

Through their unique coaching methods, ASPIRE collaborates closely with educators to develop practical and customized plans. They also foster a professional network, provide curriculum materials, and offer an innovative online platform for family engagement, billing management, and attendance tracking. Supporting organizations like ASPIRE, is pivotal in advancing early childhood education efforts.

Establish Supportive Policies and Regulations Honoring Uniqueness of Home-Based Child Care Programs

In addition to the earlier recommendations, we recommend establishing policies and regulations that support and accommodate the unique characteristics of family child care. This ensures that educators can maintain high-quality standards while addressing the specific needs of their environments.

Take, for instance, House Bill 1441 (HB1441), which recently passed in Maryland. This legislation directly responds to concerns and recommendations regarding family child care programs, aiming to integrate them as an integral part of the early childhood education system. It prioritizes flexible licensing and accreditation standards tailored to family child care settings while upholding rigorous quality benchmarks. HB1441 also introduces innovative solutions to combat workforce shortages and enhance inclusivity by creating a career ladder for pre-K teacher qualifications.

This ladder allows child care educators to progress as Early Childhood Teaching Assistants and Prekindergarten Lead Teachers, emphasizing experience-based qualifications and removing burdensome certification requirements. Furthermore, HB1441 establishes "Hubs" to support private educators offering public prekindergarten and introduces new waiver requirements for local education agencies to meet their mixed delivery goals.

With these significant legislative advances, there is a critical opportunity to empower family child care educators to effectively advocate for ongoing and future changes. Providing them with the necessary skills and resources is essential for their engagement in legislative advocacy at both local and national levels.

Here are some key strategies to support family child care educators in this role:

- **Training and Capacity Building:** Offer comprehensive training programs on advocacy, covering policy processes, communication with policymakers, grassroots organizing and building coalitions. Providing ongoing support and mentorship opportunities can further enhance their advocacy capabilities.
- **Access to Information and Resources:** Provide family child care educators with access to relevant resources like research reports, policy briefs and advocacy toolkits focused on family child care issues
- **Networking and Collaboration Opportunities:** Facilitate opportunities for family child care educators to connect, share strategies and collaborate on advocacy efforts. This can include hosting networking events, advocacy workshops, and collaborative projects that allow educators to share their experiences, exchange ideas, and amplify their collective voice.
- **Engagement in Advocacy Campaigns:** Encourage family child care educators to engage in advocacy at local, state and national levels. This includes supporting initiatives like letter-writing campaigns, petitions, public awareness events and meetings with elected officials. Providing guidance and support helps educators navigate complex issues and effectively communicate their concerns.
- **Recognition and Support:** Recognize and celebrate the advocacy efforts of family child care educators within their communities and the broader early childhood education sector. This boosts morale and raises awareness about advocacy's importance in creating positive change. Offering financial support or stipends for advocacy-related initiatives can help alleviate participation barriers.

By supporting family child care educators in becoming advocates in their communities, we can leverage their unique perspectives and experiences to drive meaningful policy changes that benefit children, families, and early childhood education.

Providing Professional Development and Training

Alongside advocacy efforts, professional development and training are essential for enhancing the quality and effectiveness of family child care programs. Professional development opportunities should accommodate educators' schedules and address specific needs such as early childhood development, curriculum planning, and business management skills.

Localized efforts across the region are already addressing the needs of family child care educators through professional development and peer learning initiatives. Expanding and sustaining these efforts is crucial in ensuring effective implementation. To further strengthen these initiatives and support family child care educators, consider the following recommendations:

- **Enhance Professional Development Programs:** Maryland should invest more in professional development programs tailored for family child care educators. This includes expanding training in early childhood development, curriculum planning, and business management. Offering these sessions during evenings and weekends can accommodate the schedules of educators' who often work non-traditional hours.
- **Facilitate Peer Learning Networks:** Establish structured networking opportunities for educators' to share best practices and support one another. This can be achieved by creating regional support groups, online forums and mentorship programs where educators can connect, exchange ideas and learn from one another's experiences. Encouraging collaboration and community-building among providers can foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation often associated with this profession.
- **Utilize Technology for Outreach and Training:** Leverage technology to expand the reach of professional development opportunities and peer learning initiatives. This includes developing online training modules, hosting webinars, and establishing virtual support groups that are accessible to educators regardless of their location or time zone. Investing in user-friendly platforms and offering technical support will enhance accessibility and engagement and accommodate educators with varying levels of technological proficiency.
- **Promote Collaboration with Early Childhood Education Stakeholders:** Encourage partnerships between family child care educators, state agencies, universities and professional associations. By leveraging the expertise and resources of these partners, Maryland can enhance the quality and effectiveness of professional development programs and peer learning initiatives for family child care educators.
- **Evaluate and Adjust Support Strategies:** Regularly assess the impact of professional development and peer learning initiatives through feedback and evaluations. Adapt and refine strategies based on these assessments to ensure they remain relevant, responsive and effective in meeting the evolving needs of educators, children and families.

Adopt Practices Promoting Inclusive Enrollment of Pre-K

Enhancing the accessibility and inclusivity of family child care programs involves adopting practices that promote inclusive enrollment. This section outlines strategies to ensure these practices cater to all families, including those from underserved communities and diverse backgrounds. States can implement outreach efforts to provide families with necessary information and support to navigate the enrollment process and make informed choices about child care options.

Supporting Families in Pre-K Enrollment

In Maryland, local initiatives are already underway to improve the accessibility of family child care programs and assist families in navigating the enrollment process. Each district has submitted detailed plans to the State of Maryland outlining their strategies to support educators and families during enrollment. To extend these efforts nationally, we recommend bolstering resource and referral centers (CCR&Rs) and local associations that promote peer-to-peer learning. We also recommend providing incentives for educators to participate in pre-K expansion and support them in guiding families through the enrollment process.

Technical Assistance for FCC Educators to Maintain Quality

Technical assistance plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of family child care programs by promoting continuous improvement and providing robust support for providers. This includes offering guidance and establishing quality rating systems that recognize excellence in family child care programs. Organizations like the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) offer nationally recognized accreditation for home-based child care programs. Providing technical assistance and coaching to family child care educators is essential for ensuring they meet rigorous quality standards and enhance children's educational experiences.

In Maryland, Resource and Referral Centers currently offer technical assistance, though inconsistently across the state, for family child care educators to increase their quality levels and qualify for state-funded pre-k expansion programs. To build upon this initiative and ensure equity, we propose expanding the number of specialists supporting providers navigating the States QRIS (MD EXCELS) program. Encouraging these specialists to collaborate with local associations for group technical assistance and peer-to-peer learning would yield great benefits.

In addition to bolstering technical assistance, it's important to foster partnerships between family child care educators and stakeholders such as local school districts and community organizations. These collaborations facilitate coordination and smooth transitions for children and families, providing a high-quality child care experience.

Maryland's local districts are engaging with family child care educators at different levels. Building trust and collaboration among providers, state authorities, local school districts, and community organizations through transparent policies is essential. State and local school districts should involve providers as meaningful partners and leaders in co-creating policies and plans that are inclusive.

Ensuring Equitable Funding and Resources for FCC Programs

Equitable funding and resources are needed to support the sustainability and high-quality services of family child care programs. Family child care educators should advocate for increased public investment in early childhood education, specifically targeting funds to support educators serving underserved communities. While Maryland has made considerable public investments in early care and education, local support levels vary. We recommend that all states allocate resources equitably to aid family child care educators in delivering high-quality early care and education. Significant public investment is necessary to transform the early care and education landscape.

Maryland's integration of home-based child care into its state-funded pre-K system not only ensures equitable access to high-quality early education but also exemplifies forward-thinking in early childhood education policy. By embracing the unique strengths of home-based care—personalized attention, flexibility, and cultural diversity—Maryland sets a precedent for other states to follow. Moving forward, continued implementation of inclusive best practices, robust professional development, and supportive regulations will further enhance Maryland's early childhood education system, leading to improved outcomes for children, stronger family engagement, and empowered educators across the state.