

Montgomery County Early Care and Education Initiative

Developing and implementing a comprehensive system of high quality accessible and affordable early childhood education for Montgomery County is a moral and economic imperative. We cannot let a generation of socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse children start their young lives with an opportunity gap that leads to an academic achievement gap. We must ensure that all of our children enter school ready to learn and realize their economic potential as the workforce of the future.

Early childhood is the first critical phase of human development, beginning before birth; continuing through the infant and toddler years; culminating in the preschool years; and transitioning into the early grades. Babies are born learning, and their early experiences and interactions with the adults in their lives shape the architecture of their developing brains. Economists, joined by education and psychology researchers, have studied the impact of high-quality early childhood services on a broad range of child and family outcomes. These studies have concluded that participation in high quality programs, particularly for children in families that experience adversity, produces better education, employment, and health outcomes later in life.

These programs are critical in giving Montgomery County's young children a future of opportunity. Many of the County's families struggle to afford high-quality care and education and need assistance with paying for child care. Montgomery County is home to over 76,000 children under the age of six, accounting for 7 percent of the total County population. Four out of ten of Montgomery County's youngest children (approximately 30,000 children) are economically vulnerable, living below 300 percent of the federal poverty level (or below \$71,550 for a family of four). Nearly half of these children are non-white, and an estimated 28 percent have at least one parent or guardian who speaks a language other than English at home.

We must strategically invest in the education of our young children to ensure that they are ready to learn from the onset of school and avoid the need for costly remediation. The latest kindergarten readiness data show that 54 percent of kindergarteners demonstrate readiness. The County's rate is higher than the State average; however, 11 Maryland counties have higher readiness rates than the County. In Montgomery County, young children from low-income households (33 percent ready for school), children who are English language learners (27 percent ready for school), and children with an identified disability (19 percent ready for school) are significantly less likely to start school ready to learn.

Investing in our young children and their families is sound economic policy. A strong early care and education system can have a positive and significant economic and educational impact in our local community, generating substantial cost savings for society with a rate of return as high as \$8 for every dollar invested by improving school and life success for our children and avoiding negative outcomes.

A comprehensive early childhood system not only provides economic benefit through the future earnings potential of participants in the workforce of the future but, also, provides immediate benefits to the local economy by increasing wages and productivity and reducing absenteeism of parents. Moreover, increasing investment in child care subsidies and higher education opportunities for early childhood professionals stimulates growth in the earnings potential of child care providers and family child care businesses.

The County is well-positioned to expand access to quality Early Care and Education (ECE) programs now. The Montgomery County Council in partnership with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has worked diligently to move the ECE agenda forward with legislative and fiscal resources dedicated as part of the 2017 Child Care Expansion and Quality Enhancement Initiative and the expansion of full-day Head Start and pre-kindergarten programming in recent years. The newly elected County Executive and Council, along with key partners at MCPS, Montgomery College, and other community partners, are ready to build on previous successes and boldly move the ECE agenda forward by launching this four-year action plan.

Over the next four years, the County will seek to significantly increase access to quality ECE for young children living in the highest need areas of the County. To meet the needs of infants, toddlers and preschoolers this effort will require increasing the supply of spots in multiple settings including Family Child Care, Center Based Care and MCPS pre-K classrooms, securing the resources to assist families in meeting the high cost of early care and education and increasing the availability of training to ensure a workforce that is ready and prepared to teach.

ECE INITIATIVE OUTCOMES TO BE ACHIEVED BY February 2020

The County Council President and County Council members, the County Executive, the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and Montgomery College (MC) have joined together in an initiative to increase the number of quality Early Care and Education (ECE) seats in a mixed-delivery system by certifying additional Family Child Care (FCC) providers, increasing resources to providers and families and identifying existing unused or underutilized classroom space in high need areas thus making quality early care and education more accessible to more families.

Outcome 1 - Expand the availability of ECE seats for infants, toddlers and preschoolers by approximately 600.

- Create 400 new seats by recruiting, training and licensing 50 new FCC providers.
 - Hire an additional part-time FCC Quality Enhancement Coordinator to recruit, support and guide FCC candidates in reaching licensing status.
 - Provide culturally and linguistically accessible start-up trainings for FCC providers in locations and times that are readily accessible to ensure full participation.
- Create an additional 190 seats in center-based/school settings in partnership with Montgomery College, MCPS and community-based providers.
 - Provide a local match to Early Head Start programs to extend funding for 3-year-olds transitioning out mid-year.
 - MCPS will open an Upcounty early childhood center in September 2019, and increase the number of full-day four-year-old inclusion classrooms at MacDonald Knolls.
 - Montgomery College's Center for Early Education will provide an active learning experience for children ages 2 through 5 at the Germantown campus.
 - HHS will work with providers to identify used or underutilized space that may be converted to classrooms.
- Provide start-up funds/resources to support outfitting new homes and classrooms.

Outcome 2 – Increase access to quality ECE to more children through increased utilization of Working Parents Assistance Program (WPA). As of Sept. 2018, the County has increased the income eligibility guidelines from \$64,200 to \$83,082 for a family of four. Additionally, a WPA supplement has been provided to supplement the Maryland Child Care Scholarship (CCS) to bring reimbursement rates to providers up to as high as 80 percent of the current County average market rate.

- Continue to supplement family CCS awards.
- Recruit new and existing providers to accept WPA.
- Conduct provider orientations and training of staff at ECE programs to support families in completing the CCS and WPA program applications.

- Conduct public outreach campaign to bring more eligible families into the CCS and WPA programs and provide direct support in identifying affordable, quality child care options.

Outcome 3 – Ensure sustainability of existing family and center-based programs to reduce provider attrition and loss of available seats.

- Provide business and finance training and coaching supports for small businesses through a collaboration between Montgomery College and the Child Care Resource and Referral Center.
- Conduct a fiscal analysis of the conversion of the WPA reimbursement rates to represent actual cost of quality care.

Outcome 4 - Establish a cross agency working group to immediately identify and resolve barriers to *expansion, access and sustainability* of quality child care in the County, including but not limited to financing, services alignment, workforce supports, community engagement. The working group will also explore the development and/or co-location of ECE programs in commercial, private, public, faith-based, and intergenerational settings. The work of this group will be guided by existing studies, plans and reports.

- Identify key decision makers in each agency to form a working group.
- Engage key external organizational and State stakeholders to ensure collaboration, alignment, maximizing resources and reducing duplication of efforts.

Outcome 5 – Monitor Kirwan Commission recommendations to ensure alignment and possible coordination with partners at the State level.