

The Early Care and Education
Experiences of Baltimore Families:

Choices, Preferences, Challenges, and Needs

September 2026



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- Strategic Thinking for Social Change whose principal served as a partner in helping to structure analyses and interpret findings; and
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This is the second in a series of reports supported by project funders and partners. It follows the **2025 Baltimore City Early Care and Education Landscape Analysis: Supply, Demand, Obstacles, and Opportunities** (June, 2025) and will be followed by a further analysis of young children's early childhood experiences in Baltimore from birth to age five conducted by linking administrative records of children born in the City to their early childhood pathways and outcomes.

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Executive Summary

Baltimore City's early care and education (ECE) system plays a critical role in supporting children's development, families' economic stability, and the city's long-term prosperity. This study examines how well current ECE options align with families' needs, preferences, and lived realities. Drawing on a citywide survey of 488 families with children ages 0–5 and in-depth interviews and focus groups with 50 caregivers of young children, this report identifies strengths in the current system as well as persistent gaps in access, affordability, and program fit.

Key Findings

Early Care and Education Utilization and Experiences

- ↪ Families' utilization of ECE varied substantially by income, race and ethnicity, and special needs status, with the greatest inequities in access emerging during the infant–toddler years and narrowing only when Head Start and public Pre-K became widely available.
- ↪ ECE arrangements differed by income, particularly in infancy and toddlerhood: families earning below the city's median household income relied heavily on parental and unpaid care, while families with incomes above 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL) had greater access to licensed centers and paid informal care.
- ↪ Publicly funded programs, such as Early Head Start, Head Start, and public Pre-K, played a critical role in expanding access for families below 300% FPL, with participation in these programs declining steadily as income increased.
- ↪ Informal care (such as nanny sharing and relying on friends and neighbors) remained a significant component of the ECE landscape across ages and incomes, especially during the infant–toddler years, suggesting ongoing gaps in the supply, affordability, and flexibility of formal care options.

Pre-K Expansion and Family Preferences

Eighty-three percent of families surveyed were aware of Maryland's intended Pre-K expansion under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. Families expressed support for a mixed-delivery system, in which publicly funded Pre-K seats are available through both public schools and approved community-based child care providers. Families also expressed a strong demand for public school-based Pre-K. Even when cost considerations were hypothetically removed from families' decision-making, public Pre-K generally remained the preferred option among various ECE settings. Among the small number of families who did prefer community-based child care programs, common reasons included program availability, location, hours, enrollment processes, and aftercare access.

Preferences also varied across groups:

- ↪ Families with lower incomes prioritized publicly funded programs.
- ↪ Families with higher incomes preferred a combination of public Pre-K and private child care centers.
- ↪ Hispanic families showed particularly strong interest in public Pre-K when access barriers were removed.
- ↪ Black families demonstrated sustained preference for Early Head Start and Head Start.
- ↪ Families of children with special needs showed stronger interest in caring for their children themselves and less interest in center-based ECE programs.

These preferences potentially reflect current ECE accessibility and use for families and underscore the importance of strengthening an inclusive, coordinated mixed-delivery system aligned with Maryland's Blueprint for the Future.

Key Factors in Choosing ECE Programs

Across all groups, families prioritized children’s well-being in addition to logistical considerations when choosing ECE programs. Children’s happiness, safety, and nurturing relationships consistently ranked high.

Families emphasized:

- ↪ Warm teacher–child relationships.
- ↪ Supportive and inclusive environments.
- ↪ Effective communication with families.
- ↪ Individualized attention and tailored support meeting special needs.
- ↪ Affordability and location.

Challenges in Accessing Early Childhood Resources

Families faced multiple barriers to securing ECE arrangements, including:

- ↪ High costs.
- ↪ Limited eligibility for the Child Care Scholarship (Maryland’s child care subsidy program, which helps eligible families pay for ECE programs).
- ↪ Limited availability of open seats.
- ↪ Inconvenient locations.
- ↪ Scheduling mismatches between families’ needs and the operating hours of ECE programs.
- ↪ Complex application processes and documentation requirements.
- ↪ Limited aftercare options for programs that operate only during the school day (e.g. public Pre-K programs).

Barriers were not experienced uniformly. Families of children with special needs faced additional challenges navigating required evaluations and inclusive placements. Immigrant families reported language, documentation requirements, and eligibility rules as barriers. Families earning between 101% FPL and 600% FPL often earned too much to qualify for assistance but struggled to afford private ECE options.

Knowledge of Early Childhood Resources and Outreach

Most families reported knowing where to seek information about ECE and school readiness, but their confidence in navigating specific ECE options was substantially lower. Knowledge gaps were evident among Hispanic families and families earning between 101% FPL and 300% FPL. Families relied heavily on trusted community networks, peer recommendations, and schools for information. Because many families had older children enrolled, Baltimore City Public Schools could serve as an effective channel for disseminating early childhood information.

Families’ Perceptions of School Readiness

Families consistently prioritized communication and social–emotional skills as central to their children being ready for school – over academic or physical skills, though priorities varied by income and by race and ethnicity. Families who earned less than 300% FPL placed greater emphasis on academic skills. Racial and ethnic groups also differed in the priority placed on academic and interpersonal development.

Recommendations & Next Steps

Important progress has been made in Baltimore City in expanding publicly funded ECE programs. However, families continue to face barriers related to affordability, availability, program hours, geographic access, inclusive services, and navigating a complex system. Families' strong interest in public Pre-K supports a long-term commitment to universal access, while varied needs and preferences underscore the importance of preserving a mixed-delivery system that includes public schools, Head Start, community-based centers, family child care, and other settings. Continued progress will require coordinated action across Baltimore City Public Schools, public agencies, ECE providers, community organizations, and state partners.

1. Make Publicly Funded Pre-K Universally Available for 3- and 4-Year-Olds

Baltimore City should work toward guaranteeing access to a high-quality, publicly funded Pre-K option for every 3- and 4-year-old whose family wishes to enroll, regardless of income, neighborhood, language, disability, or family circumstances. Expansion should occur across both public schools and qualified community-based providers, using an equity-centered approach that prioritizes families experiencing the greatest barriers while building toward universal access. Implementation should preserve meaningful family choice and ensure that expanded access is accompanied by inclusive services, language support, practical program hours, and clear enrollment information.

2. Expand Infant, Toddler, and Flexible Care Supply

The greatest access and affordability challenges occur during infancy and toddlerhood, when care is both expensive and scarce. The city and state should provide targeted grants, incentives, and technical assistance to expand high-quality infant and toddler slots, particularly in neighborhoods where demand substantially exceeds supply. Investments should support family child care networks, small-center models, and shared-services approaches, as well as greater access to Judy Centers and other family-centered support services. Families using nanny shares or similar arrangements would also benefit from practical guidance on contracts, safety, and quality.

3. Address Affordability Gaps Across the ECE Continuum

Families with low and moderate incomes often earn too much to qualify for existing assistance but not enough to afford private ECE. Sliding-scale assistance and other financial support should therefore extend beyond current eligibility thresholds. The Child Care Scholarship process should also be simplified, with clearer guidance on eligibility, documentation, and renewal. State partners should reexamine employment- and activity-based eligibility requirements that prevent families from obtaining care while seeking employment, education, or training. Outreach about publicly funded options and financial assistance should occur through trusted community channels.

4. Increase Seat Availability and Coordinate Enrollment

Long waitlists and limited openings prevent many families from securing their preferred ECE arrangements. Public investments should increase seats in the neighborhoods and age groups with the greatest unmet demand. At the same time, families need more timely and accurate information about openings and waitlists. A coordinated enrollment, referral, and waitlist system could reduce duplicative applications and help connect families to available alternatives. Application, waitlist, enrollment, and neighborhood-level data should guide decisions about where additional capacity is most needed.

5. Expand Aftercare and Scheduling Flexibility

Program schedules frequently do not align with families' work, education, and transportation needs. Reliable and affordable before- and after-care should be available alongside publicly funded Pre-K, and the city should support extended-day, extended-year, and flexible-hour models across all settings. Partnerships between schools and community-based providers could help create seamless full-day coverage. Families should receive clear information about operating hours, aftercare availability, and related costs before making enrollment decisions.

6. Improve Geographic Access and Address Transportation Barriers

The location of available programs and transportation options significantly affect whether families can use ECE options. Neighborhood-level population, enrollment, demand, and transit data should inform where seats and family support services are expanded. Enrollment and referral processes should assess transportation barriers and connect families with existing resources when possible. The city should also explore targeted transportation partnerships or pilot strategies for families who otherwise lack a practical way to reach an available program.

7. Create a Multilingual, Trusted, and User-Friendly ECE Navigation System

Families often know that ECE resources exist but struggle to identify appropriate programs, understand eligibility requirements, complete applications, or obtain reliable information. Baltimore City needs a centralized, user-friendly source of current information about availability, cost, eligibility, hours, location, language access, after-care, and inclusive services. Online resources should be paired with individualized assistance from multilingual staff, family service coordinators, and trusted community partners. Schools, pediatricians, libraries, faith organizations, employers, public agencies, and community organizations should disseminate consistent information through text messages, email, social media, community events, Spanish-language media, and parent ambassador networks.

8. Strengthen Inclusive Support Services for Children with Special Needs

Families of children with special needs often experience delays, complicated processes, and difficulty finding inclusive placements. Evaluation, eligibility, and referral processes for Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) should be streamlined, and more family service coordinators should be available to support families through evaluation, placement, and transitions. Inclusive options should be expanded across both public schools and community-based settings. Providers also need sustained professional development, consultation, and resources to implement inclusive practices effectively.

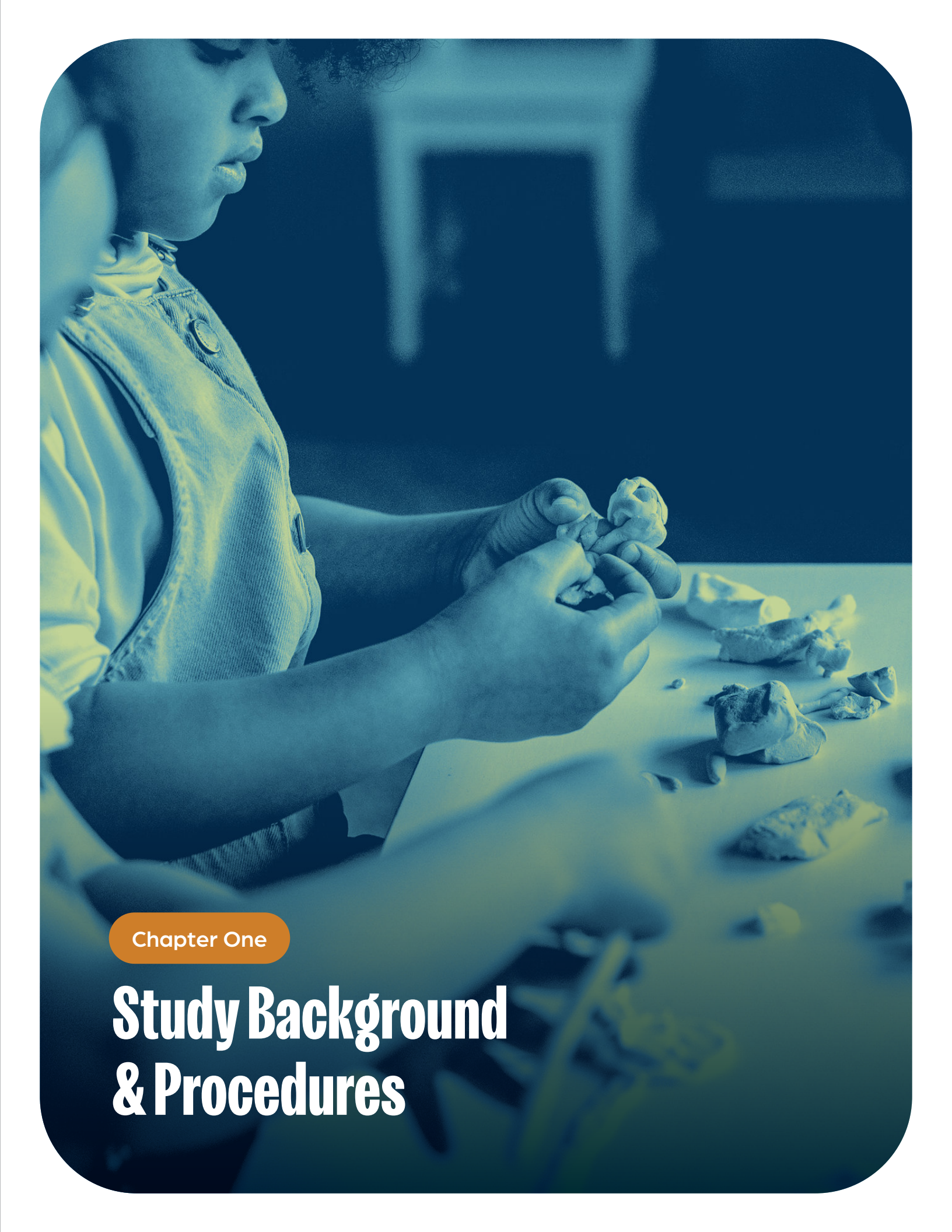
9. Invest in Workforce Stability and Fostering Strong Relationships

Families consistently connect program quality with stable, well-supported educators and nurturing relationships. Improving compensation, benefits, working conditions, and retention incentives for the ECE workforce is therefore central to both access and quality. Educators also need coaching, mental health support, professional growth opportunities, and organizational environments that promote adult and child well-being. Investments should strengthen culturally and linguistically responsive family engagement and bilingual staffing. Because many educators struggle to find care for their own children, the city should also explore reserved slots, priority enrollment, reduced fees, subsidies, or employer-supported child care benefits for ECE and K–12 staff.

10. Expand Integrated Data Infrastructure and Establish a Unique Child Identifier

Baltimore City should strengthen its existing data-linking infrastructure to include all publicly funded ECE programs, including community-based providers participating in mixed delivery. A consistent unique child identifier, assigned as early as possible and maintained across ECE and K–12 systems, would improve the city's ability to examine access, continuity, transitions, and outcomes. This work will require expanded data-sharing agreements, common definitions, governance procedures, and technical support for community providers without creating undue administrative burdens. Linked data should be used to examine enrollment, waitlists, attendance, program transitions, and school readiness, while regularly reporting disaggregated findings and maintaining strong privacy, security, consent, and data-access protections.

Realizing this vision will require coordinated, sustained, and equity-centered action from public and private leadership and funders and across Baltimore City agencies, Baltimore City Public Schools, ECE providers, community organizations, and state partners. By expanding capacity, reducing barriers, strengthening the workforce, and building a more integrated mixed-delivery and data system, Baltimore can move toward an ECE system in which every family can access an option that is affordable, high quality, and responsive to their needs.

A photograph of a young child with curly hair, wearing denim overalls over a light-colored shirt, focused on shaping a piece of clay with their hands. The child is seated at a white table, and several other pieces of clay are scattered on the surface. The background is blurred, showing a white chair. The entire image has a blue color overlay.

Chapter One

Study Background & Procedures

Study Background

The economic stability of every community begins with the health and education of its people (National Academies of Sciences et al., 2023). This study explored potential opportunity gaps between the existing early care and education (ECE) system in Baltimore City and the needs of families with young children as reported by families and caregivers themselves.

In this report, we used the term ECE to represent the full array of ECE program options in the city, including public Pre-K, Head Start, licensed child care centers, home-based programs, and informal care.

This report is a companion piece to the [2025 Baltimore City Early Care and Education Landscape Analysis: Supply, Demand, Obstacles, and Opportunities](#) that provided a community-level look at the city's population ages 0 to 5 and early care and education opportunities by geography to examine questions around equity, access, demand, supply, quality, and outcomes. It will be followed by an update of the [2020 Prenatal to Five Experiences Report](#), which looked at individual children born in Baltimore and their pathways to and through publicly funded services and support up to kindergarten, examining questions of scope and scale and links between ECE participation and school readiness.

In this study, we found that access to ECE is divided along lines of race, ethnicity, and income in Baltimore. Understanding families' preferences for and access to ECE throughout the city is part of developing a healthier Baltimore.

Addressing gaps is our collective responsibility. Doing so can contribute in meaningful ways to children's educational success, the ability of parents to participate in the workforce and pursue their own education and training, and our city's economic stability and growth.

To complete this report, project partners conducted two sets of data collection: 1) a survey of 488 families and 2) interviews and focus groups with 50 families and caregivers with children ages 0 to 5 in Baltimore City.

Survey Procedures, Participants, and Analyses

An online survey was distributed to families and caregivers with children ages 0 to 5 living in Baltimore City. Survey questions explored parents' and caregivers' background and demographic information, experiences and considerations of ECE, challenges to accessing early childhood resources, understanding of the current ECE system in Baltimore City, and suggestions for improving the system.

To distribute the online survey, we first requested help from members of the Baltimore City Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) to forward recruitment emails to families on our behalf using their networks. The research team also attended family events to distribute survey flyers in Baltimore City and to provide information about the study.

Survey and relevant recruitment materials were translated into Spanish, French, and Arabic by a professional translation service. Participants had the option to select the language they preferred when completing the survey. Participants also had the option to leave contact information for compensation. A random drawing was used to select a total of 300 participants to receive a \$20 gift card as appreciation for completing the survey.

Table 1 presents the demographic background of survey participants. In total, we received valid survey responses from 488 families. Among the survey respondents, 90% were parents (parents, stepparents, or adoptive parents), 6% were grandparents, and 3% were foster parents. Families with one child were the most common (46%), followed by families with two children (41%). Eight percent of families had three children and 5% had more than three children. Self-reported data from participants indicated that most respondents were White non-Hispanic (55%), followed by Black/African American (23%), and Hispanic/Latino (9%). Of these, 84% were primarily English-speaking households. Most respondents were either employed (72%) or stay-at-home caretakers (20%), with 3% looking for work. There were 64% of families that utilized at least one public assistance or support program for children and families.

TABLE 1
Survey Participants' Demographics

	N	%
Racial/ethnic groups		
American Indian or Alaska Native	10	2
White	266	55
Asian / Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	18	4
Black / African American	113	23
Spanish, Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Chicano/a/x origin	44	9
Middle Eastern / North African	3	1
Bi-racial / Multi-racial	11	2
Family structure		
Parent/Stepparent/Adoptive Parent	439	90
Grandparent	28	6
Foster Parent	13	3
Employment status		
Stay-at-home caretaker	98	20
Employed	349	72
In school (high school, GED, college, post-college)	4	1
In training program	10	2
Looking for work	17	3
Disabled	1	0.2
Number of children		
One	219	46
Two	197	41
Three	37	8
Four	119	4
Five	66	1
Six	1	0.2
Age range of children^a		
0–12 months	264	54
12–18 months	135	28
19–36 months	282	58
36–48 months (3 years old)	282	58
49–60 months (4 years old)	281	58
5 years old	437	90
Older than 5	126	26
Children with special needs	170	35
Child Care Scholarship recipient	172	35
Support services recipient^b		
At least one service	312	64
WIC	203	42
TANF	82	17
SNAP	153	31
Medicaid	166	34
Primary language at home		
English	410	84
Spanish	35	7
French	2	0.4
Arabic	2	0.4
Mandarin	1	0.2

Note. Percentages were calculated based on the total sample size N of 488.

^aFamilies were allowed to select more than one option, considering that some families have more than one child.

^bFamilies were allowed to select more than one option. WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

To understand how family income and resources contribute to variation in ECE preferences and access, we conducted subgroup analyses using income thresholds that correspond to the Pre-K expansion priorities in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, Maryland's signature effort to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Family income was categorized into four tiers based on multiples of the federal poverty level (Figure 1). To determine household size, we used the number of children reported as a proxy: families with one child were classified as 3-person households, and those with more than one child as 4-person households. Although this was an approximation (as total household size was not directly collected) it provided a reasonable estimate.

The four tiers were:

1. Tier 1A (12% of the survey sample): Below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level

Household income of \$29,999 or less, representing families experiencing the greatest financial constraints among our sample and capturing those eligible for Early Head Start and Head Start programs.

2. Tier 1B (52% of the survey sample): Between 100% and 300% of the Federal Poverty Level

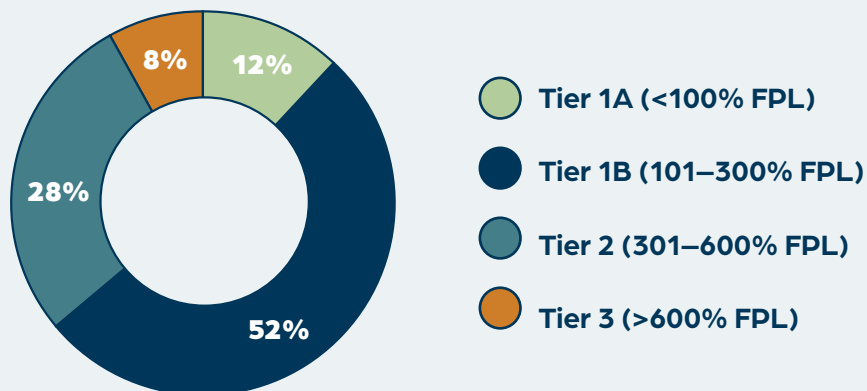
Households earning \$30,000–\$74,999 (for a 3-person household) or \$30,000–\$99,999 (for a 4-person household). This threshold aligned with the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and Baltimore City Public Schools' public Pre-K priorities, which give preference to families at or below 300% of the FPL. Examining this group separately preserved important nuances among families who qualify for publicly funded Pre-K yet may have still faced substantial challenges related to ECE affordability.

3. Tier 2 (28% of the survey sample): Between 300 and 600% of the Federal Poverty Level This threshold included households earning \$75,000–\$149,999 (for a 3-person household) or \$100,000–\$199,999 (for a 4-person household). This group of families belonged to the public Pre-K priority 2 group. Their incomes exceeded the priority 1 threshold, yet families may have encountered meaningful ECE affordability challenges.

4. Tier 3 (8% of the survey sample): Above 600% of the Federal Poverty Level

This threshold included families earning \$150,000 or more (for a 3-person household) or \$200,000 or more (for a 4-person household). This threshold corresponded to families who fell outside Pre-K expansion priorities and were the least likely to qualify for other financial support related to ECE.

FIGURE 1
Participating Households' Income Distribution



We also conducted subgroup analyses by race and ethnicity to examine whether and how families' experiences, perceptions, and preferences related to ECE access vary across groups. We compared responses from **White non-Hispanic**, **Black non-Hispanic**, and **Hispanic** families. Given Baltimore City's long-standing racial inequities in housing, neighborhood resources, employment opportunities, and access to early childhood services (King et al., 2019), examining patterns by race/ethnicity was essential for identifying potential disparities in ECE choice and barriers to access. These analyses helped illuminate whether certain groups encountered disproportionate challenges related to affordability, availability, or ECE access and offered vital insights for Pre-K expansion planning.

Finally, we conducted subgroup analyses comparing **families of children with special needs** to **those without**. ECE access can differ substantially for children requiring additional support. Maryland's Blueprint emphasized inclusive practices and ensuring that all children have equitable access to high-quality ECE. By examining preferences and perceived barriers within this subgroup, we could identify whether families of children with special needs encountered unique challenges.

Interview and Focus Group Procedures, Participants, and Analyses

Interviews and focus groups allowed families to share in-depth experiences that may not have been fully captured through the survey. We recruited families for interviews and focus groups through multiple channels. At the end of the online survey, families had the option to express their interest in participating in a follow-up interview. The research team also collaborated with various partner organizations to schedule focus groups with families—especially families from groups underrepresented in the survey. Families were able to participate in focus groups regardless of whether they completed the survey.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted via Zoom or in-person, depending on the needs of organizations and families. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes, and each focus group included three to six participants and lasted around one hour. The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded using Zoom regardless of the setting and transcribed for coding and data analysis. A \$20 gift card was provided to participants for their participation.

Table 2 presents the demographics of interview participants. A total of 50 participants completed the focus groups or interviews: 12 in focus groups and 38 in individual one-on-one interviews. Of these, 10 interviews were conducted in Spanish and then translated into English for coding and data analysis.

Demographically, 40% of interview/focus group participants were Black/African American, 14% were Hispanic, 22% were White/non-Hispanic, 16% were multiracial, and 8% did not provide race/ethnicity information. Interviewees were most commonly mothers (n=35), although fathers and grandparents were also included.

The caregivers interviewed reported having one child (42%), two children (32%), three children (10%) or four to five children (10%). Household structure consisted of two-parent homes (48%), single-parent homes (26%), and multigenerational homes (18%).

To synthesize findings from interviews and focus groups, we conducted Applied Thematic Analysis using qualitative data (Guest, 2011). To begin, two team members independently reviewed the full set of transcripts, then collaborated to develop an initial set of themes and codes through an in-depth review of five transcripts (10% of the total). Two senior researchers then drafted an initial codebook with detailed descriptions of each code and theme, and two other team members reviewed and revised. In the second stage, four team members worked in pairs to double-code each transcript based on the initial codebook. Each pair met weekly with the two senior team members to discuss and resolve any coding disagreements. Full consensus on all coded segments was achieved before moving on to the next round, and the codebook was updated iteratively throughout this process. In the final stage, coded segments were compared and synthesized inductively to identify applied analytic themes relevant to the report's research questions. Themes were developed based on how frequently and consistently they appeared across interviews and focus groups, and their relevance to the research focus. Representative quotes for each theme are presented throughout the report.

TABLE 2**Interview and Focus Group Participants'
Demographic Backgrounds**

	N	%
Racial/ethnic groups^a		
White	11	22
Black / African American	20	40
Spanish, Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Chicano/a/x origin	7	14
Bi-racial / Multi-racial	8	16
Relationships with children		
Mother	35	70
Father	3	6
Grandparent	3	6
Family/household type		
Single-parent homes	13	26
Two-parent homes	24	48
Multigenerational homes	9	18
Number of children		
One	21	42
Two	16	32
Three	5	10
Four	3	6
Five	2	4

Note: ^a Eight percent of interview/focus group participants did not provide race/ethnicity information.

Some Caveats: Sample Characteristics and Interpretation Considerations

Findings from this report should be interpreted in light of the demographic characteristics of the study sample. The survey sample has higher household incomes and a higher proportion of White families compared to the city population overall. As a result, survey findings may not fully capture the experiences of families facing the greatest economic constraints or those from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. In addition, because families were asked about both prior and current ECE experiences, their children's age or household income at the time of the survey may not reflect their eligibility at the time of enrollment.

Despite targeted recruitment, the number of Hispanic families in the survey sample remained relatively small ($n = 44$), which results in smaller cell sizes for certain subgroup analyses and necessitates caution when interpreting survey findings for this group. We note that the interview/focus group sample more closely reflects the city's overall racial and ethnic composition. In particular, Hispanic families were intentionally oversampled in the qualitative interviews to ensure that their perspectives were represented in greater depth.

Respondents to the survey and interview/focus group were generally high users of ECE, which is expected given the recruitment strategy, but may overrepresent families who are already more engaged with formal ECE options compared to the broader population of city families. In addition, because these data reflect families' reported choices, preferences, and experiences, findings should be interpreted with the understanding that families may vary in their familiarity with different ECE program types.

Finally, multiple responses were permitted for most survey questions to allow families to accurately reflect the range of arrangements, preferences, and experiences that applied to them, especially for families with multiple children. As a result, the total of responses for some items exceeded 100 percent. Responses should be interpreted as the proportion of respondents selecting each option rather than mutually exclusive categories.

Chapter Two

Early Care and Education Utilization and Experiences

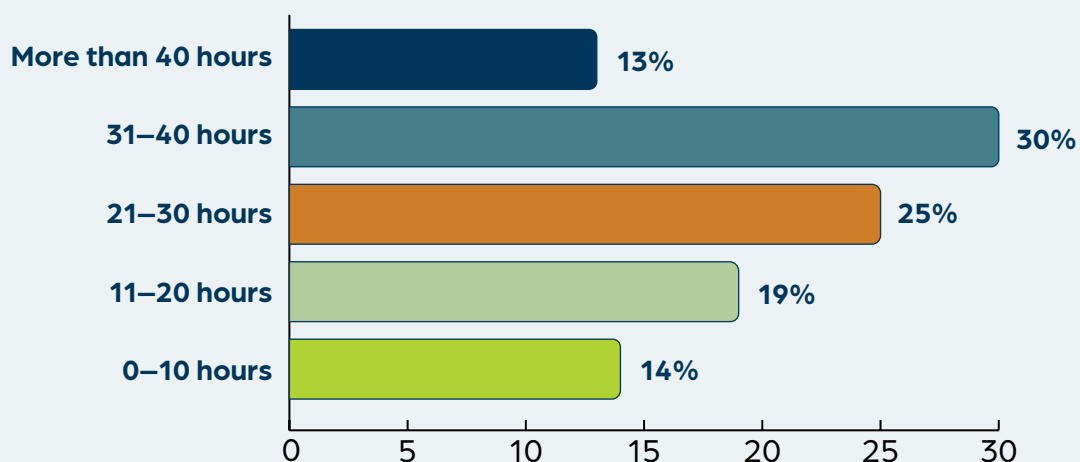
Early Care and Education Utilization and Experiences

In this chapter, we describe participants' past and current ECE usage patterns and trends by age group, income level, race and ethnicity, and special needs. We also provide information on families' decisions about using public Pre-K. Survey and interview/focus group data are synthesized to offer deeper insights.

Overall ECE Usage by Survey and Interview Participants

Most families who completed the survey reported that they were using ECE programs for their children. About 72% of families reported having one child enrolled in an ECE program, and 22% of families reported having two children enrolled in ECE programs. On average, families spent about \$1,040 monthly on each child in an ECE program and \$1,950 monthly in total per household. Over half of children spent between 20 and 40 hours in ECE programs each week (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
Hours in ECE Weekly



In the survey, we asked specific questions about families' current and past experiences of using various types of ECE programs by age. Families were able to select more than one option when reporting the types of child care and preschool programs their children had used during a specified age range, reflecting families' need to identify full day, full year coverage.

Table 3 summarizes patterns of ECE usage across three developmental periods: ages 0–2, age 3, and ages 4–5. Given the multiple reporting options, responses do not add to 100%.

Most families with children who were 2 years old or younger used informal child care. Forty six percent of very young children stayed home with parents, 25% with other family members, and 24% with a babysitter, nanny, or neighbor.

About 21% of families used Early Head Start programs, and 26% used a private child care center for their children 2 or younger.

At 3 years old, about 31% of families chose to have their child stay home with parents, 18% with other family members, and 17% with a babysitter, nanny, or neighbor. Thirty-one percent of families with 3-year-olds enrolled their children in Head Start programs, 23% enrolled in public Pre-K programs, and 27% in private child care centers.

These estimates should be interpreted as parent-reported program use rather than verified enrollment by program type. This distinction is especially important for children ages 0–3. Formal public Pre-K enrollment is generally limited for children under age 4 in Baltimore City, and some families may have selected “public Pre-K” to refer more broadly to school-based early childhood programs and services, such as Judy Centers, other publicly funded early childhood programs (e.g., Head Start or Early Head Start classrooms located in or connected to public schools), or other programs they perceived as public. Therefore, reported public Pre-K participation among children ages 0–3 should be interpreted with caution and understood as reflecting families’ perceptions of program type or funding source rather than confirmed enrollment.

For families with children who were 4 or 5 years old, about half enrolled their children in public Pre-K programs and 20% chose private child care centers. Thirty percent of families had children who stayed home with parents, 18% with other family members, and 17% with a babysitter, nanny, or neighbor.

Overall, the pattern of current and past child care usage across different age groups demonstrates how families transition between ECE arrangements as children developed from infancy through preschool years. Families were more likely to use informal care arrangements during infancy and toddlerhood and increasingly shifted toward formal ECE settings as children reached preschool age.

TABLE 3
ECE Use Across Age Groups

	0-2 years old		3 years old		4-5 years old	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
At home with a parent, stepparent, or guardian	209	46	111	31	82	31
At home with other family members	113	25	63	18	49	18
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighborhood care)	110	24	62	17	45	17
Public Pre-K	–	–	81 ^a	23 ^a	130	49
Early Head Start/Head Start	97	21	111	31	50	19
Licensed home-based program	55	12	36	10	14	5
Licensed child care center	118	26	95	27	55	20

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

^aPublic Pre-K at age 3 may mainly refer to Judy Centers or other publicly funded early childhood programs located in public schools.

Among all interview and focus group participants, 58% of families were currently using ECE programs. Of those who were not currently using ECE, 38% reported using ECE programs in the past. The most popular ECE programs used were private child-care centers (32%), followed by Early Head Start/Head Start (20%), and home-based programs (18%). Twelve percent of these families reported using public Pre-K and nanny sharing (12% for each), and one family reported using Judy Centers.

Understanding Families' Decisions About Public Pre-K

Survey participants used a range of ECE options across ages, with public Pre-K becoming the most common setting by ages 4 to 5, serving nearly half of children (49%) in this age group. To capture the full landscape of family choice, we asked families who did not select public Pre-K at age 4 to describe their reasons why not, recognizing that families' decisions may reflect diverse needs and circumstances.

Table 4 captures these responses. The most common reasons given for not enrolling in public Pre-K were the sentiment that their child was not yet old enough to attend (25%) or that their child was not ready (25%). Some families indicated that they were not eligible for public Pre-K (19%). Issues related to program logistics were also reported, with 21% of families reporting that available program locations were not convenient, and 16% reporting that either the assigned location or the length of the public Pre-K day did not work for their family's needs. In addition, some families preferred other child care settings (13%) or chose to keep their child at home (7%). Several families also shared other reasons in open-ended responses, including difficulties with children needing an Individualized Family Service Plan, challenges in securing a seat through the lottery process, application timing, and long waitlists.

TABLE 4
Reasons for Not Choosing Public Pre-K at Age 4

	N	%
My child was not old enough to attend	42	25
My child was not ready yet	41	25
The locations of available programs were not convenient	35	21
Our family was not eligible	32	19
The length of Public Pre-K did not work for my family	26	16
The assigned location did not work for my family	26	16
I preferred other child care settings	22	13
I preferred to keep my child(ren) home	11	7

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

We asked those who selected the option of "I preferred other child care settings," to share the reasons for their preference. The most commonly shared reason was the more flexible schedule and smaller class sizes offered by private and home-based ECE programs compared to public Pre-K.

Additionally, families in the Tier 1B income group often viewed public Pre-K as a more formal school-like setting and felt their children were not ready for a larger classroom environment. They wanted their children to stay closer to their families in early childhood.

Higher-income families were more likely to be concerned about the pedagogical approaches and curriculum provided in ECE programs, whereas lower-income families often expressed concerns about their children's readiness to transition from parental care to more formal learning environments.

Subgroup Analysis by Income

Table 5 disaggregates patterns of ECE usage by household income levels (Tier 1A at or below 100% FPL, Tier 1B between 101–300% FPL, Tier 2 between 301–600% FPL, and Tier 3 above 600% FPL). The data revealed consistent and substantial differences in ECE access by income, with notable shifts in utilization patterns as children grew. (Please keep in mind that respondents were able to select more than one preference, so totals did not add to 100%.) Families were asked about both prior and current ECE experiences, and therefore, their children's age or household income at the time of the survey may not reflect their eligibility at the time of enrollment.

These trends highlight important inequities in access to ECE opportunities, especially in the earliest years, and underscore the critical role of public investment in ECE.

TABLE 5
ECE Use by Age and
Across Income Groups

	Ages 0–2 (%)			
	Tier 1A ≤100% FPL	Tier 1B 101–300% FPL	Tier 2 301–600% FPL	Tier 3 >600% FPL
Stay home with parent/ guardian	52	53	41	17
At home with other family members	18	27	23	10
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighbor)	12	24	32	20
Public Pre-K	-	-	-	-
Early Head Start / Head Start	24	26	-	-
Licensed home-based program	14	12	14	13
Licensed child care center	14	24	29	53

TABLE 5 (CONT)

	Age 3 (%)			
	Tier 1A ≤100% FPL	Tier 1B 101–300% FPL	Tier 2 301–600% FPL	Tier 3 >600% FPL
Stay home with parent/ guardian	21	41	23	4
At home with other family members	12	18	26	0
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighbor)	2	20	22	9
Public Pre-K	9 ^a	29 ^a	22 ^a	26 ^a
Early Head Start / Head Start	74	26	-	-
Licensed home-based program	5	7	22	13
Licensed child care center	12	20	46	61

TABLE 5 (CONT)

	Age 4 (%)			
	Tier 1A ≤100% FPL	Tier 1B 101–300% FPL	Tier 2 301–600% FPL	Tier 3 >600% FPL
Stay home with parent/ guardian	22	40	26	6
At home with other family members	4	21	22	11
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighbor)	0	19	22	17
Public Pre-K	52	46	66	50
Early Head Start / Head Start	35	21	–	–
Licensed home-based program	0	3	15	0
Licensed child care center	4	20	26	33

Note: Families were able to select more than one option. Cells that were inconsistent with the typical age or income eligibility requirements of the program are omitted.

^a Public Pre-K at age 3 may mainly refer to Judy Centers or other publicly funded early childhood programs located in public schools.

From birth to age 2, more than half of Income Tier 1A and 1B families reported using home-based care with a parent or guardian (52% and 53%, respectively). The percentage of care received from other family members was highest among Income Tier 1B families (27%). Families in Income Tier 3 were nearly twice as likely to use center-based ECE compared to families in Income Tiers 1B and 2, and nearly 4 times more likely than families in Income Tier 1A.

These findings suggest that financial barriers may play a substantial role in families' decisions to keep infants and toddlers at home rather than enrolling them in formal care settings.

Early Head Start, a free, federally funded program, was helpful for families in Income Tiers 1A and 1B, with around a quarter of families in this category (24% for Tier 1A and 26% for Tier 1B) enrolling their children in Early Head Start.

Interestingly, informal care arrangements (such as babysitters, nannies, or neighbors) were highest among families in Income Tier 2 (32%) and lowest among families in Income Tier 1A (12%). This may suggest that families in Income Tier 2 have greater financial flexibility to choose care arrangements, yet may still find full-time formal care options insufficient, unavailable, unaligned with scheduling needs, or not fully affordable for their needs.

At age 3, the use of parental care dropped significantly for Income Tier 3 families (4%) and remained high for the Income Tier 1B families (41%). Public Pre-K and Early Head Start/Head Start became major options for families in Income Tier 1A (74%).

Enrollment in licensed child care centers remained high among families in Income Tier 3 (61%). Families in Income Tiers 1A and 1B accessed these programs at substantially lower rates (12% and 20%, respectively). Income Tier 2 families (at 46%) used these programs more often than families in Income Tiers 1A and 1B, but not as often as Tier 3 families did.

These patterns reflect both cost barriers and broader structural inequities in supply, especially the limited availability of affordable, high-quality private program slots in many communities.

During ages 4 and 5, families' utilization of public Pre-K programs dramatically increased across income tiers (52%, 46%, 66%, and 50%, respectively). At the same time, the use of parental care remained relatively high for families in Income Tier 1B (40%).

Use of licensed child care centers remained stratified: only 4% of Income Tier 1A families used licensed center-based programs compared with 33% of families in Income Tier 3.

Head Start continued to serve as an important option for Income Tier 1A and 1B families. This pattern was consistent with program eligibility criteria and demonstrated Head Start's significant role in filling gaps left by the limited availability or affordability of private programs.

Informal care arrangements remained relatively stable across Income Tiers 1B, 2, and 3 at ages 4–5, ranging from 17% to 22%. Even as children approached kindergarten entry, a notable portion of families continued to utilize informal care settings.

DATA DIGEST

Overall Trends by Income

- 1. Income-based disparities are largest in the youngest age group (0–2).** These early inequities reflect the high cost and limited supply of infant–toddler care, which disproportionately restricts access for families with lower incomes.
- 2. Early Head Start and Head Start are critical components of the ECE system,** providing access to structured learning environments for families who might otherwise be unable to secure formal care.
- 3. Public Pre-K significantly expands access to formal ECE at age 4.** For many families, public Pre-K programs narrow income-based disparities in access to formal ECE settings.
- 4. Income Tiers 1B and 2 (101–600% of FPL) show mixed patterns,** sometimes resembling Tier 1A families (e.g., use of family care) and other times Tier 3 families (e.g., informal or formal paid care), reflecting their unique position in the ECE market where they may earn too much to qualify for subsidies but too little to comfortably afford private options.
- 5. Supporting flexible, family-centered options — including family child care homes and informal care—remains important,** particularly in communities with limited supply or among families who require non-traditional hours.

Subgroup Analysis by Race/Ethnicity

Table 6 highlights racial and ethnic variation in ECE arrangements from infancy through preschool. Examining patterns among White, Black, and Hispanic families, disparities in ECE access began early and persist through the preschool years. We found that Hispanic families relied more on parental care, Black families on Head Start, and White families on informal or formal private options. These differences reflect broader structural inequities in affordability, availability, and cultural responsiveness within the ECE system.

TABLE 6.
ECE Use Across
Racial/Ethnic Groups

	0-2 years old (%)			3 years old (%)		
	White (n= 238)	Black (n=105)	Hispanic (n=42)	White (n= 185)	Black (n= 88)	Hispanic (n= 35)
Stay home with parent/stepparent/ guardian	47	41	55	33	27	37
At home with other family members	27	26	19	20	15	17
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighbor)	31	14	12	24	7	11
Public Pre-K	-	-	-	32 ^a	10 ^a	17 ^a
Early Head Start / Head Start	23	24	10	18	55	46
Licensed home-based program	11	15	12	10	13	9
Licensed child care center	28	24	29	33	18	9

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

^a Public Pre-K at age 3 may mainly refer to Judy Centers or other publicly funded early childhood programs located in public schools.

TABLE 6. CONT.

	4-5 years old (%)		
	White (n= 144)	Black (n=55)	Hispanic (n=24)
Stay home with parent/stepparent/guardian	32	29	42
At home with other family members	24	11	4
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighbor)	22	9	8
Public Pre-K	49	38	71
Early Head Start / Head Start	22	20	17
Licensed home-based program	6	9	0
Licensed child care center	23	22	4

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

^a Public Pre-K at age 3 may mainly refer to Judy Centers or other publicly funded early childhood programs located in public schools.

When children were 2 years old or younger, parental care was most common among Hispanic families (55%), followed by White (47%) and Black families (41%), which may reflect cultural preferences, economic conditions, and limited local availability of licensed infant–toddler care, which is among the most expensive and least available setting in ECE (Jessen–Howard et al., 2020). Informal care, such as babysitters, nannies, and neighbors, which provides flexible schedules and options, was more accessible to White families (31%) compared to Black (14%) and Hispanic families (12%). Black and White families were more connected to Early Head Start programs compared to Hispanic families, consistent with national literature pointing to enrollment barriers for Hispanic families, such as language access, documentation concerns, transportation, or limited slots in Hispanic-serving communities (Johnson et al., 2017).

At age 3, racial and ethnic differences in care arrangements continued to widen. Parental care declined for all groups, but Hispanic families continued to have the highest rates (37%). White families (32%) accessed public Pre–K at more than triple the rate of Black families (10%) and nearly double that of Hispanic families (17%). Note that since this is age 3, “public Pre–K” may refer to Judy Centers in public schools or other publicly funded ECE programs. Black and Hispanic families were more likely to be enrolled in Head Start, whereas White families relied more on a combination of private options and public Pre–K. Licensed center-based participation at age 3 remained highest among White children (33%), lower among Black children (18%), and lowest among Hispanic children (9%), indicating that access to private preschool programs remained limited for many families of color.

For children ages 4 to 5, participation in public Pre–K increased significantly across all racial and ethnic groups. Hispanic families in our sample had the highest participation in public Pre–K (71%) followed by White (49%) and Black families (38%). This surge among Hispanic families suggests that when cost and eligibility barriers are removed to ECE (e.g., through public Pre–K offerings), participation increases substantially. The interview data also indicated that Hispanic families felt more comfortable with using formal ECE settings when children were older. Meanwhile, licensed child care centers remained a popular option for White (23%) and Black families (22%). The private center-based option was less commonly used among Hispanic families (4%). This may reflect financial barriers, cultural preferences for public Pre–K, and limited supply in Hispanic communities.

DATA DIGEST

Overall Trends by Race/Ethnicity

- 1. Racial and ethnic disparities begin early and persist.** Differences in parental care, informal care, licensed care, and public programs appear in infancy and remain visible through kindergarten entry.
- 2. White families have greater access to private options,** including informal paid care and licensed centers, across nearly all age groups.
- 3. Black families rely heavily on Head Start,** reflecting both eligibility and the critical role the program plays in providing stable early learning environments.
- 4. Hispanic families exhibit the highest rates of parental care** until ages 4 to 5, when public Pre–K becomes more accessible and widely used.
- 5. Public Pre–K substantially increases access for Hispanic families,** reducing disparities at ages 4 to 5.
- 6. Access to licensed center-based programs remains inequitable,** especially for families of color.

Subgroup Analysis by Special Needs

Table 7 shows that parents of children with special needs were more likely to choose to care for their children at home across all ages from 0 to 5, compared to families without children with special needs. This was consistent with existing research indicating that families of children with disabilities may prefer parental care when formal programs do not fully meet their children's developmental or support needs (Henly & Adams, 2018).

Among ECE program options, children ages 0 to 3 with special needs were most likely to be enrolled in Early Head Start/Head Start programs and children with special needs ages 4 to 5 were most likely to be enrolled in public Pre-K. It is critical to ensure that Early Head Start/Head Start and public Pre-K programs have sufficient staffing, specialized expertise, and access to supportive services, which will be important for sustaining this role and providing high-quality, inclusive care.

TABLE 7
ECE Use by Children
with Special Needs

	0-2 years old (%)		3 years old (%)		4-5 years old (%)	
	With Special Needs (n=164)	Without Special Needs (n=262)	With Special Needs (n=123)	Without Special Needs (n=210)	With Special Needs (n=85)	Without Special Needs (n=161)
Stay home with parent/stepparent/guardian	63	36	47	22	44	25
At home with other family members	17	30	13	20	9	24
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighbor)	18	28	11	20	11	21
Public Pre-K	-	-	18 ^a	27 ^a	60	45
Early Head Start / Head Start	20	23	37	29	11	24
Licensed home-based program	13	12	12	9	5	5
Licensed child care center	17	32	19	31	12	26

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

^a Public Pre-K at age 3 may mainly refer to Judy Centers or other publicly funded early childhood programs located in public schools.

While most families of children with special needs continued to care for their children at home, many also shifted toward formal ECE settings as children got older. At age 2 or younger, nearly two-thirds (63%) of children with special needs stayed home with a parent, compared to 36% of children without special needs. At age 3, 37% enrolled their children in Head Start, and by ages 4 to 5, 60% transitioned into public Pre-K. Despite these transitions, over 40% of children with special needs remained at home, versus about 25% of those without special needs. This suggests potential barriers to accessing non-parental care for children with special needs, which might be due to concerns about program capacity and inclusion, availability of specialized support, flexible scheduling for medical appointments, and/or families' preferences driven by trust and perceived safety.

During interviews, families shared that they often encountered challenges navigating the enrollment process. For instance, one parent shared that contacting school personnel and seeking timely evaluations for their child's special education eligibility was challenging and caused delays in enrollment.

DATA DIGEST

Overall Trends by Special Needs

1. **Children with special needs are much more likely to remain in parent-only care**, particularly at age 2 or younger, and this reliance remains higher than peers without special needs through ages 4 to 5.
2. **Licensed center-based care is consistently less common** for children with special needs at all ages.
3. **Early Head Start/Head Start plays a critical role at age 3 for children with special needs**, serving over one-third (37%), a higher rate than among children without special needs (29%).
4. **Public Pre-K enrollment increases sharply** with age for both groups, with especially high participation among children with special needs by ages 4 to 5 (60% vs. 45%).
5. **Families of children with special needs rely less on informal care arrangements**, which may suggest constraints in accessing caregivers equipped to support children with additional needs.

Qualitative Insights: Reasons for Using or Not Using Formal ECE

During the interviews and focus groups, families shared their reasons for selecting specific types of ECE arrangements, which were linked to the perceived benefits of attending formal ECE programs as well as the barriers that constrained ECE access.

Reasons for Choosing Publicly Funded ECE

Among families who enrolled their children in publicly funded ECE programs, such as public Pre-K and Early Head Start/Head Start, the primary reasons included that they believed these programs provided more professional and structured care and educational opportunities for their children beyond what families felt they could provide at home. For example, children could “benefit from being in a more structured environment day-to-day” and “engage with peers and learning.” These benefits may be especially important for families with **children with special needs** during the transition period, as one parent shared that:

“I wanted him to get that year of transitioning [in a formal ECE program]..., because he does have a delay, I wanted him to be able to practice, those procedural things, so that next year, when he has to start school at the age of 5, he will not have to practice in that...”

—A mother with two children, one of whom is enrolled in a Head Start program and another one who had experiences with public Pre-K

Similarly, some families described that Early Head Start offered **developmental monitoring and support** that was beyond the care they could provide at home. For example, a Hispanic mother described that:

“Early Head Start not only supports children by caring for them, but they also focus on the children’s motor development. Usually, as a mother, I can’t detect certain things that happen in babies, like speech or motor problems, and things like that. So, Early Start goes beyond that, beyond just education.”

—A mother of three children, with experience in Head Start programs

Reasons for Not Choosing Formal ECE

As for families who did not enroll their children in formal ECE programs, frequent reasons cited included the high cost and long waitlists of formal ECE programs, and the families' ineligibility for Child Care Scholarship vouchers.

Due to these concerns, many Baltimore families sought alternative informal ECE arrangements, such as **nanny sharing**. One mother shared that affordability was the major driver for using nanny sharing:

"We decided for the nanny because, we also didn't, like, at the daycare we're at, we don't qualify for vouchers, and, there isn't, like, a sibling discount, so we would have been paying for two of them, and in the daycare ended up being more expensive than if we hired a nanny."

—A mother of two children using nanny sharing

Beyond cost, the practical and emotional advantages of nanny sharing were also emphasized, as another mother shared that using a nanny share allowed her **easy access for breastfeeding**:

"One of the reasons we chose that [nanny sharing] is that I breastfeed, and so it really gave me an opportunity to see my kid throughout the day...much less stress for both of us than pumping and sending bottles."

—A mother of a child currently using nanny sharing

The advantages of nanny sharing in terms of smaller adult-child ratios were also described by parents, as nanny sharing most often includes one nanny caring for two children.

Other families chose to **care for their children themselves**, either because of personal preference or practical barriers. One parent expressed her concerns about safety and quality of other ECE arrangements, as she described:

"I was afraid they [children] would be mistreated...I prefer them to be under my care, me, their mother, so I can supervise what they do and give them good care."

—A mother of three children, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

However, for some low-income and immigrant families, **staying home was not a personal preference but the result of systemic barriers**, including documentation requirements, employment verification, and eligibility restrictions. Two immigrant mothers described how these barriers forced them to remain unemployed:

"They asked me for a lot of requirements, and I didn't have them. Well, I didn't meet them. And I could never find someone to take care of my child. All that time I had to be unemployed taking care of him, because I didn't. I didn't have anyone to leave them with."

—A mother of two children, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

"But they ask me if [I have a payroll] check and things like that, and the truth is, I don't have that [to be eligible for the childcare scholarship] because I don't work [without available childcare]."

—A mother of one child, not enrolled in ECE programs

Summary

Overall, these responses suggest that some families trust that formal ECE programs provide more professional and structured support for their children's development beyond what families could provide at home. At the same time, more attention is needed for families who want to enroll their children in formal ECE but face various barriers such as affordability, eligibility, and access to information. These challenges are particularly pronounced for low-income and immigrant families. In addition, given the popularity of nanny sharing arrangements in Baltimore City, there is a potential opportunity to more closely examine these informal care models and provide guidance for families using them, as well as strengthen oversight for nanny sharing platforms and provide support for families who face challenges in accessing nanny sharing. It might also be worthwhile to consider how some preferred features of nanny sharing, such as a small adult-child ratio and more affordable costs for families who were ineligible for child care vouchers, might be incorporated into existing ECE settings to better meet families' needs.

Qualitative Insights: Satisfaction with Past/Current ECE Arrangements

In interviews and focus groups, families were asked about their satisfaction with their current ECE choices, including both formal and informal child care arrangements.

Satisfied with Current ECE Arrangements

Among families who expressed satisfaction, participants consistently emphasized features associated with high-quality care and education. These included opportunities for children to build relationships with peers, a positive and encouraging learning environment, individualized instruction and attention, clear and consistent communication between teachers and families, and access to professional support and services, particularly for children with special needs and for children from Spanish-speaking households.

One consistent theme that emerged across the interviews was families' excitement and pride in observing their children's developmental growth after entering formal ECE settings, especially improvements in social skills and learning readiness. As one parent shared:

"When my son started, he was delayed in speech. He is completely caught up now...he's just flourishing, and he's a social butterfly now, before he wouldn't go near anyone."

—A mother of three children using a private ECE program

Similarly, a Spanish-speaking mother described her surprise at her child's rapid learning after entering ECE:

"Well, what shocked me the most is that she arrived without knowing anything, because she [the daughter] didn't even know how to communicate with anyone...and now...I was very surprised by what she learned."

—A mother of one child enrolled in a private ECE program

A positive and supportive learning climate emerged as a critical factor shaping families' satisfaction with their ECE choices. One mother described how teachers were "always very positive" and gave "the kids a lot of space to try things." Another parent described her child's ECE environment as "very loving," noting that "the kids are very friendly, and they'll even engage the parents," which reflected "the level of comfort and love expressed in the space."

For immigrant families, the cultural and linguistic inclusivity of ECE settings was particularly important. One Hispanic mother highlighted the presence of bilingual social workers and the strong representation of Latino families in her children's programs:

“Both for my 9-year-old son and my current 3-year-old, these centers have social workers, and they’ve noticed that the influence of the Latino community is quite significant. There are more Latino children. And there have been social workers who are bilingual.”

—A mother of two children enrolled in a Head Start program

Another key feature associated with families’ satisfaction was consistent and positive communication between teachers and families. Parents valued frequent updates about their children’s experiences, as well as opportunities for more direct and individualized communication. For example, one parent described having daily one-on-one conversations with her child’s teacher to share information from child’s experiences at home and discussing strategies with the teacher to support her child’s development. These communication practices were often supported by program-level policies that encouraged family engagement. As one parent explained:

“Even though I work full-time...it’s important to me to be involved in my children’s lives and to be able to be there for things like that, and so I really like that they have kind of an open-door policy of, like, welcoming families into the school and getting them involved if you want to be.”

—A mother of two children with experience in private ECE programs

The infrastructure of ECE was also emphasized by families, especially regarding schedule flexibility for working parents. One parent described how a home-based child care provider’s extended hours were essential for accommodating her work demands:

“My biggest thing is time, because of what I do for work... Sometimes I gotta be there early, sometimes I gotta be there late. I absolutely need a flexible daycare provider, and...she [the child care] was open 12 hours a day. So that was great for me.”

—A mother of one child, with experience in both home-based and public Pre-K

Similarly, families using nanny-sharing emphasized flexibility and opportunities to maintain close parent-child attachment. One parent who worked from home explained that nanny sharing allowed her to balance work schedules while maintaining close connection with her child throughout the day. Location convenience for the ease of drop-off and pick-up was also frequently mentioned as a factor contributing to families’ satisfaction.

Dissatisfied with Current ECE Arrangements

While over half of families reported satisfaction with their current ECE arrangements, some families expressed dissatisfaction, primarily due to reasons such as high teacher turnover, frequent last-minute notifications, perceived teacher incompetence, and concerns about children's safety.

Frequent **teacher turnover** in ECE settings was one of the most emphasized reasons for dissatisfaction, as families felt it disrupted children's learning and emotional stability. One parent shared:

"The things that I don't like are teacher turnover. There's just so much teacher turnover. I don't know why it is... I'm sure they don't get paid a lot, I'm sure there's lots of other places that these people could work. But that is the toughest part."

—A mother of two children with experience in private ECE programs and nanny sharing

Ineffective communication also emerged as a concern for families, particularly when an ECE program's notification and expectations conflicted with parents' work schedules. Parents described frustration with last-minute notifications that required them to arrange alternative child care on short notice. One parent suggested that emergency situations would be better handled through phone calls rather than emails, as working parents may not regularly check personal emails during the workday. Another parent emphasized the need for more advance notice for events requiring parental participation.

Safety concerns were also a factor that led to families' dissatisfaction. A grandparent and a mother both expressed uncertainty about the safety of their children's current ECE settings and suggested strengthening security measures, such as installing surveillance cameras.

Families also expressed concerns about teachers' **lack of familiarity with their children's academic and social-emotional needs**. Another family described their decision to switch ECE programs after realizing that teachers did not understand their child's development:

"The [previous] teachers didn't know anything about her [the daughter]. They didn't know what she was doing academically, they didn't understand her, like, socially, emotionally, they said she just never talked. We would ask her at home, you know, how was school? She didn't really say much either, and we just kind of knew that something wasn't right,"

—A mother of two children with experience in private ECE programs

Finally, although **nanny sharing** was frequently described as a strategy to offset the high cost of care, some interview and focus group participants also expressed notable dissatisfaction with this arrangement. Families reported difficulty finding a partner family whose schedules, caregiving preferences, and expectations aligned with their own, as well as deciding which home would host the care. When a family preferred to host care in their home, they often needed to find a partner family willing to manage daily transportation.

"We absolutely couldn't afford a nanny on our own. And even finding a nanny was complicated. I had to find, like, the one gem of a Facebook group that everybody goes to, and then figure out how to post in there...It took six weeks to find another family that could join that needed the same schedule and hours as us, and we just... Because of the nature of that, we didn't know if we were going to completely lose all child care because we didn't find somebody else, because we knew we couldn't afford to keep the nanny on our own."

—A mother of one child, currently using nanny sharing

Proximity was another key constraint, as most families required a partner family living nearby to make the arrangement feasible. Participants also noted the fragility of nanny-sharing arrangements: if one family withdrew, the remaining family was left without care and faced the burden of finding a replacement or securing alternative arrangements.

In addition, families also faced the difficulty of identifying a qualified and trustworthy nanny. One parent described the challenges of conducting a background check and assessing reliability prior to hiring a nanny.

“And then on the nanny scene. It just feels a little bit like the Wild West... it just feels very old-fashioned, like, it’s all about personal references, it’s about vibe, it’s about, do you feel like you trust this person? Are you really going to, like, do a criminal background check? Are you going to drug test them? No. So you’re just going to trust... are you going to put a nanny cam in your house?”

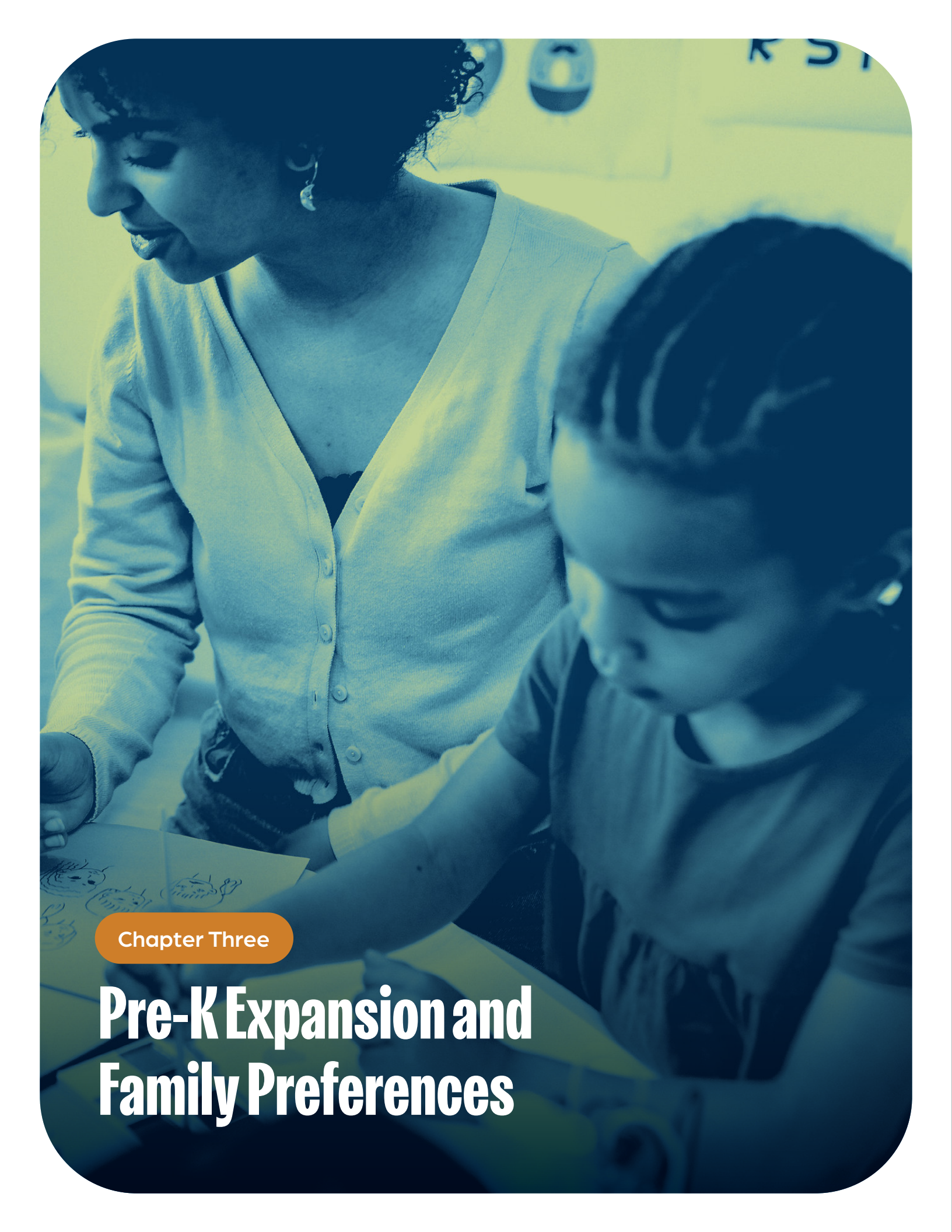
—A mother of two children enrolled in a private ECE program

Summary

Taken together, families’ satisfaction and dissatisfaction with ECE arrangements are primarily shaped by the socio-emotional climate of the setting, the quality of teacher-child interactions, communication between ECE programs and families, and the availability of professional support for children with special needs.

Families are most satisfied when they observe meaningful progress in their children’s learning and social development. Programs that prioritize these features tend to receive higher satisfaction from families.

In contrast, concerns related to safety, teacher turnover, inadequate communication, and limited teacher engagement contribute to dissatisfaction. Notably, families who chose nanny-sharing and other informal arrangements consistently emphasize flexibility and alignment with work schedules, as well as opportunities to maintain close parent-child attachment. At the same time, they share challenges with nanny-sharing, which needs further attention.

A photograph of a woman and a young girl looking at a drawing together. The woman is on the left, wearing a light-colored cardigan, and the girl is on the right, wearing a dark shirt. They are both looking down at a piece of paper with drawings on it. The image has a blue tint and rounded corners.

Chapter Three

Pre-K Expansion and Family Preferences

Pre-K Expansion and Family Preferences

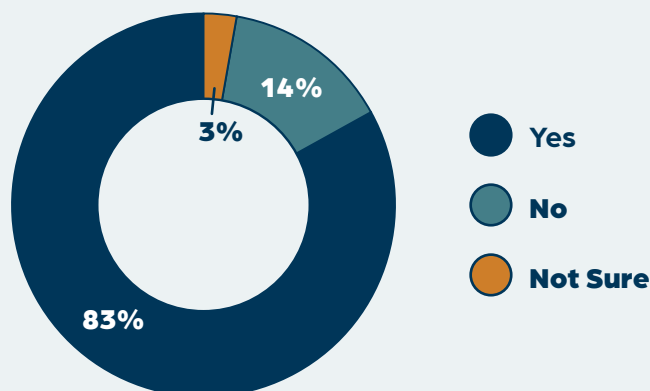
To inform Maryland's Pre-K expansion under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, this chapter summarizes findings on families' preferences for ECE options and the key factors influencing their decisions.

Awareness of Maryland's Commitment to Pre-K Expansion

We began by examining families' awareness of Maryland's commitment to Pre-K expansion under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future through which a mixed-delivery system is intended to offer free Pre-K to income-eligible 3- and 4-year-olds (Figure 3). Notably, most families (83%) in the survey reported being aware of the expansion. However, awareness varied across racial and ethnic groups. White families (86%) were more likely to report awareness compared to Black families (77%) and Hispanic families (72%). These disparities may suggest the potential gaps in communications among Hispanic and Black families who may face structural barriers in accessing information within community networks. Awareness did not vary by income groups or special needs.

FIGURE 3

Awareness of Maryland Pre-K Expansion Program



Preferences for ECE Options in a Mixed-Delivery Context

Under the mixed-delivery system, publicly funded Pre-K seats are available through both public schools and community-based child care providers. In the survey, families were asked to indicate which ECE arrangements they would prefer for their children at ages 3 and 4 if all ECE options were free and available to them, including public Pre-K, Head Start, private child care centers, family child care, and informal care arrangements (Table 8). It is important to note that the preference percentages do not sum to 100% because participants could select more than one ECE arrangement. The findings represent the proportion of families who reported preferences for each ECE arrangement rather than mutually exclusive categories. These preferences were then compared with families' current ECE use, described in the previous chapter.

Because public Pre-K is already tuition-free for families who are eligible, these findings should not be interpreted as showing the effect of making public Pre-K free. Rather, the comparison shows how families rank various ECE options when cost is removed as a consideration across all types of care. In this hypothetical scenario, families expressed a strong preference for formal ECE settings across both age groups.

More than half of families indicated a preference for **public Pre-K** for 3-year-olds (55%), and nearly two-thirds preferred public Pre-K for children ages 4 to 5 (65%), percentages which are higher than reported current use. This pattern suggests that public Pre-K is highly desired by families even when other ECE options are also described as free and available.

Head Start also emerged as an important component of families' preferred ECE options, particularly for 3-year-olds. Among families imagining care for a 3-year-old, 43% indicated a preference for Head Start, compared to the 31% whose children are currently enrolled. Preferences for Head Start were lower for children ages 4 to 5 (27%) but remained higher than current participation (19%), suggesting continued interest alongside expanding public Pre-K options.

Families also expressed greater interest in **licensed child care centers** than is reflected in current use. Forty-one percent of families preferred licensed centers for 3-year-olds, compared to 27% currently enrolled, and 35% preferred this option for children ages 4 to 5, compared to 20% current use. Preferences for **licensed home-based programs** similarly exceeded current participation at both ages.

By contrast, preferences for **informal care** and **home-based parental care** were lower than current use, particularly for children ages 4 to 5. While approximately one-third of families currently cared for their children at home with a parent or guardian, fewer families identified this arrangement as their preferred option when free access to other programs was assumed.

Taken together, these findings indicate that families' current ECE arrangements may not fully reflect their preferred choices, and that affordability and access constraints likely shape observed patterns of current use. Under conditions of full free access, families showed strong interest in a mixed-delivery system offered by public Pre-K, Head Start, and licensed private center-based and home-based programs. This suggests the importance of expanding availability and reducing barriers across various ECE settings.

TABLE 8
Preferences for ECE Options if Programs Were Free

	Preferences if All Free (%)		Current Use (%)	
	3 years old	4-5 years old	3 years old	4-5 years old
At home with a parent, stepparent, or guardian	30	24	31	31
At home with other family members	19	17	18	18
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighborhood care)	19	14	17	17
Public Pre-K	55 ^a	65	23 ^a	49
Head Start	43	27	31	19
Licensed home-based program	17	14	10	5
Licensed child care center	41	35	27	20

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

^aPublic Pre-K at age 3 may mainly refer to Judy Centers or other publicly funded early childhood programs located in public schools.

The disparities between current use and expressed preferences suggest that families' current reliance on prenatal/home-based or informal care is significantly influenced by the availability and affordability of formal ECE settings.

DATA DIGEST

Key Differences in Preferred Options and Actual Use

1. **Preference data show much higher demand for public Pre-K** than actual enrollment reflects.
2. **Informal care is relied on more in reality than preferred**, suggesting it currently fills gaps in cost, hours, or availability. Parents' preference for informal care declines when cost barriers are removed.
3. **Licensed center-based and home-based care are more preferred than currently utilized**, pointing to affordability and supply barriers.
4. **Parental or family care is used more often than preferred**, indicating constrained access to high-quality formal care.

A strong mixed-delivery system needs to expand access, maintain multiple high-quality options, and ensure equitable pathways, especially for families who currently rely on less-preferred arrangements due to structural barriers.

Subgroup Analysis by Income

Families' preferred ECE options varied by income levels when cost was hypothetically not a constraint (Table 9). For 3-year-olds, Income Tier 1A families showed strong preferences for publicly supported options, including public Pre-K (49%) and Head Start (72%), whereas Income Tier 3 families preferred public Pre-K (74%) and private child care centers (60%). Income Tiers 1B and 2 families were more likely than other tiers to prefer home-based care with parents (36% and 32%, respectively) or other family members (23% and 20%), suggesting a stronger inclination toward family-based arrangements. However, public Pre-K was the most popular option for both Tier 1B and Tier 2 families (52% and 57%).

By ages 4 to 5, preferences across income tiers became more strongly oriented toward public Pre-K, particularly among Income Tiers 1A and 3, where the majority of families preferred this option (72% and 91%, respectively). Despite this pattern, Income Tier 3 families continued to show strong interest in licensed child care centers (51%), indicating a desire for choice within a mixed-delivery system even at older ages.

When cost was hypothetically removed as a constraint, across both age groups, preferences for licensed private child care -- center-based and home-based -- were stronger than current use among Income Tiers 1A and 1B, suggesting that cost may limit families' ability to choose their preferred arrangements.

Overall, these findings indicate that family preferences under conditions of full free access reflected both strong demand for public Pre-K and sustained interest in diverse ECE settings across income levels. Supporting a well-coordinated mixed-delivery system that includes public Pre-K, Head Start, and licensed private programs will be critical to meeting families' varied needs and preferences as Maryland continues to implement the Blueprint for the Future.

TABLE 9
Families' Preferences
for ECE Options by
Income Levels

	Age 3 (%)			
	Tier 1A ≤100% FPL	Tier 1B 101–300% FPL	Tier 2 301–600% FPL	Tier 3 >600% FPL
Stay home with parent/ guardian	15	36	32	17
At home with other family members	9	23	20	6
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighbor)	6	23	17	14
Public Pre-K	49 ^a	52 ^a	57 ^a	74 ^a
Early Head / Head Start	72	42	36	23
Licensed home-based program	13	18	19	14
Licensed child care center	36	35	48	60

TABLE 9 CONT.

	Age 4 (%)			
	Tier 1A ≤100% FPL	Tier 1B 101–300% FPL	Tier 2 301–600% FPL	Tier 3 >600% FPL
Stay home with parent/ guardian	13	34	17	11
At home with other family members	6	22	16	11
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighbor)	0	17	15	14
Public Pre-K	72	59	62	91
Early Head / Head Start	47	20	32	23
Licensed home-based program	13	15	17	9
Licensed child care center	26	30	45	51

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

^a Public Pre-K at age 3 may mainly refer to Judy Centers or other publicly funded early childhood programs located in public schools.

Subgroup Analysis by Race/Ethnicity

Families' preferred ECE options also varied by racial and ethnic groups when all ECE options were described as free and available (see Table 10). Across all racial and ethnic groups, public Pre-K emerged as the preferred ECE option, underscoring its broad appeal to families even when other ECE arrangements were also presented as no-cost options.

In particular, Hispanic families demonstrated a strong preference for public Pre-K at age 4 (68%). Because public Pre-K is already tuition-free for families who are eligible, this gap should not be interpreted as reflecting tuition cost barriers to public Pre-K. Rather, the difference between reported preferences and current use suggests that factors other than tuition cost may shape families' ability to use their preferred ECE arrangement. However, because this study did not directly examine the specific reasons for this gap, the finding should be interpreted as descriptive and as an area for further investigation.

Head Start remained an especially preferred option for Black families at both ages. Nearly two-thirds of Black families preferred Head Start for 3-year-olds (62%), and a significant portion continued to prefer Head Start for 4-year-olds (44%). This pattern highlighted the continued value families place on Head Start's comprehensive services and community-based approach, even as public Pre-K options expanded.

In addition to public Pre-K, White families were more likely than Black and Hispanic families to prefer licensed private child care centers at both age 3 (43%) and age 4 (40%). While Black families also showed relatively high preferences for licensed centers at age 3 (42%), preferences declined by age 4 (29%). Hispanic families were less likely than other groups to express a preference for licensed private centers at both ages, which may reflect differences in access or program availability in their communities.

Across racial and ethnic groups, preferences for home-based and informal care were generally lower than preferences for formal ECE settings, particularly by age 4, reinforcing families' interest in structured ECE environments when cost is not a limiting factor.

Overall, these findings suggest that families across racial and ethnic groups share a strong interest in public Pre-K, while also valuing different options to cover the full day. Aligning program availability, geographic access, and enrollment processes with families' preferences, particularly for Hispanic and Black families, will be essential to ensuring equitable participation as Maryland continues to expand early learning opportunities under the Blueprint for the Future.

TABLE 10
Families' Preferences for ECE Options by Racial/Ethnic Groups

	Age 3 (%)			Age 4 (%)		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
At home with a parent, stepparent, or guardian	34	21	28	28	23	14
At home with other family members	21	13	19	20	10	16
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighborhood care)	25	7	16	18	6	11
Public Pre-K	58 ^a	51 ^a	44 ^a	60	70	68
Head Start	35	62	47	21	44	16
Licensed home-based program	17	20	12	15	16	16
Licensed child care center	43	42	33	40	29	21

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

^a Public Pre-K at age 3 may mainly refer to Judy Centers or other publicly funded early childhood programs located in public schools.

Subgroup Analysis by Special Needs

Table 11 presents the preferences of families by whether their child has special needs, under the assumption that cost was not a constraint. At age 3, families with children with special needs (43%) were more likely than those of children without special needs (28%) to prefer their children stay home with parents. Although preferences for home-based parental care declined by age 4 for both groups, families of children with special needs continued to show slightly greater preference for home-based arrangements.

The findings suggested that families' preferred ECE options varied by children's special needs status and age. Although Head Start represented an important source of past and current care for families of children with special needs, public Pre-K appeared to be the most frequently selected preferred option among families of children with special needs. Preferences for public Pre-K increased with age and were similar across both groups by age 4. The differences between families' current ECE use and stated preferences suggest that families' choices may reflect a range of considerations, including program availability, eligibility, children's needs, and family circumstances. These findings underscore the importance of maintaining a range of high-quality, inclusive ECE options within the mixed-delivery system so that families can access programs that best align with their needs and preferences.

TABLE 11
Families' Preferences
for ECE Options by
Special Needs

	Age 3 (%)		Age 4 (%)	
	Children with Special Needs	Children without Special Needs	Children with Special Needs	Children without Special Needs
At home with a parent, stepparent, or guardian	43	23	28	22
At home with other family members	13	23	12	20
Informal care (babysitter, nanny, neighborhood care)	12	23	11	16
Public Pre-K	49 ^a	58 ^a	65	64
Head Start	34	48	21	30
Licensed home-based program	19	17	17	13
Licensed child care center	22	53	26	40

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

^a Public Pre-K at age 3 may mainly refer to Judy Centers or other publicly funded early childhood programs located in public schools.

DATA DIGEST

Family Preferences by Income, Race/Ethnicity, and Special Needs

- 1. Across all families, public Pre-K is the most preferred ECE option even when cost was not a constraint to other settings.** Preferences for public Pre-K increase by age and converge across income levels, racial/ethnic groups, and special needs status.
- 2. Preferences for other ECE settings vary by income level,** with lower-income families showing stronger interest in publicly funded options such as public Pre-K and Head Start, while higher-income families express greater preference for licensed private child care centers alongside public Pre-K.
- 3. Preferences also differ by race and ethnicity, even as public Pre-K remains the top choice across groups.** Hispanic families show a particularly strong preference for public Pre-K at age 4, while Black families demonstrate sustained interest in Head Start. White families are more likely than Black and Hispanic families to prefer private, licensed center-based care.
- 4. Families of children with special needs express different preference patterns,** including greater reliance on home-based parental care at younger ages and lower preference for private center-based ECE programs. Public Pre-K is the preferred option for families regardless of special needs status, particularly by age 4.

Overall, gaps between families' preferred and current ECE arrangements suggest that access barriers may shape enrollment patterns, underscoring the importance of expanding inclusive, geographically accessible, and well-coordinated options across public Pre-K, Head Start, and licensed private providers as Baltimore City continues implementing the Blueprint for the Future.

Preferences for Public Pre-K Programs

While many families indicated their preferences for public Pre-K, we also aimed to better understand families who preferred other ECE arrangements to inform the ongoing implementation of Pre-K expansion under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. We asked parents and families about their eligibility and willingness to enroll their children in public Pre-K. Among survey participants, 78% reported that their child was eligible for public Pre-K. Among those who were or might be eligible, over 90% expressed plans to enroll their children in public Pre-K programs in Baltimore City. This finding was aligned with families' reported preferences for publicly funded ECE programs.

For the small number of families who did not want to enroll their child in public Pre-K program ($n = 32$), we asked the reasons why. Table 12 presents the frequency of reasons they selected. Frequently mentioned reasons include the inconvenience of locations of available public Pre-K programs and the length of public Pre-K schedule. Some families also felt that their child was not ready for public Pre-K setting or preferred to keep their child home for longer.

There were 13 families who indicated a preference for other child care settings (e.g., private ECE programs) even if they were eligible for public Pre-K. In the open-ended responses, common reasons cited included curriculum differences and preferences for smaller, trusted, or familiar settings. Some parents perceived the public Pre-K program as "overly rigorous and emphasize rule following and achievement" and "lack of time playing outside," which hindered their interests in enrolling their children.

TABLE 12

Reasons for not choosing Public Pre-K

	N	%
My child was not old enough to attend	42	25
Our family was not eligible	32	19
The assigned location did not work for my family	26	14
The locations of available programs were not convenient	35	21
The length of Public Pre-K did not work for my family	26	14
My child was not ready yet	41	25
I preferred other child care settings	22	13
I preferred to keep my child(ren) home	11	7
Other reasons	22	13

Qualitative Insights: Reasons for Using Private vs. Public ECE Programs

In interviews and focus groups, families were asked whether they would enroll their children in Baltimore City Pre-K, assuming that they were eligible. Most families expressed their interest in using public Pre-K, primarily because of its greater affordability compared to private ECE options. Some parents also described a sense of safety in using public programs, as they trusted in government efforts to ensure children's safety:

"I believe the kids will be safe. And since it's what government is doing, and of course the government will make sure that kids are well taken care of, and they are in good hands."

—A mother of two children, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

Families who preferred private ECE options often described their application and enrollment processes as easier to navigate than the centralized public Pre-K application system. For some families, the number of choices and the lack of guaranteed placement at a neighborhood school made the public Pre-K process feel confusing and overwhelming. As one parent explained:

"That process [of public Pre-K application]...was a little daunting and overwhelming, because they've changed it recently, so it wasn't just, kind of to your local school. It was pre-K programs throughout the city that you could choose to be at, so that just didn't quite sit right with me...and just navigating it "

—A mother of two children, currently using a private ECE program

Families also emphasized the importance of care arrangements that aligned with parents' work schedules. Although public Pre-K itself may be available, uncertainty about aftercare could make it impractical for working families. Private ECE programs were sometimes viewed as offering more reliable or flexible full-day schedules. One parent shared:

"Public Pre-K students are not guaranteed spots in the aftercare, which is critical. If I don't have aftercare, I can't take off work at 2.30 to pick up my kid."

—A mother of one child, with experience in private and home-based ECE programs

Families also perceived private programs as having smaller class sizes and more individualized attention, which they believed could better support their children's learning and developmental needs. One parent described switching from public Pre-K to a private program because of concerns about classroom size:

"I just felt like going to Pre-K the class would have been overcrowded. And at least here [at the private program] she'd get the attention, the one-on-one, like, if she's struggling in this area, they can focus on that."

—A mother of one child with experience in both public Pre-K and private ECE programs

Other factors that affected families' decisions in enrolling their children in public and private ECE programs included their preference to enroll siblings in the same school and trust in their current ECE programs. One parent explained that:

"If it worked out for us that we were able to get a spot in the same school where they were that would be really valuable. We also have heard pretty good things about the specific Pre-K classroom in the school where we would hope to get a spot. There is a possibility that if we got a spot in another nearby Pre-K that we would consider it, but I think we would possibly be less inclined to do it if it wasn't at the same school as our other kids."

—A mother of four children, currently using a private ECE program

Key Factors in Choosing ECE Programs

When asked to identify the most important factors when choosing ECE programs for their children, Baltimore families in this sample prioritized children's experiences and relationships within programs (Table 13).

Children's happiness and well-being emerged as most important, with nearly three-quarters of families (71%) rating it as "very important," followed closely by health and safety (69%).

Relational and environmental aspects of quality care were also highly valued. Approximately two-thirds of families rated teacher-child relationships (64%), the physical environment (63%), and teacher-parent relationships (61%) as very important. About 57% of families emphasized the importance of preparing children for kindergarten. Together, these findings suggest that families placed greater emphasis on nurturing, supportive, and developmentally appropriate environments than on logistical considerations alone.

Practical factors such as location and transportation (58%) and programs' ability to meet children's special needs (57%) were still important to many families. Notably, cost and affordability were rated as very important by just over half of families (53%). Similarly, staff education and credentials (55%) and Maryland EXCELS quality ratings (51%) played an important role in families' decision-making. Fewer families rated scheduling options, staff or student demographics, or recommendations from others as very important factors.

Open-ended responses further reinforced families' emphasis on program quality and fit. Parents highlighted the importance of curriculum and pedagogical approaches (e.g., play-based learning or science and technology exposure), child-centered practices, smaller class sizes, and culturally diverse and inclusive environments. These qualitative insights aligned with the quantitative findings and underscored that, for many Baltimore families, perceptions of children's well-being and day-to-day experiences were of highest importance.

TABLE 13**Important Factors in Choosing ECE Programs**

	Not very important (%)	Somewhat important (%)	Very important (%)
Child's happiness & well-being	7	18	71
Health & safety	8	19	69
Teacher–child relationships	10	22	64
Physical environment (cleanliness, space)	11	22	63
Teacher–parent relationships	8	26	61
Locations (distance, transportation)	12	26	58
Preparing children for school readiness	11	26	57
Meeting child's special needs	12	26	57
Staff education/credentials	11	29	55
Cost/affordability	11	32	53
Maryland EXCELS ratings	11	33	51
Teaching staff shares language/culture	16	32	48
Full-day/after-school option	17	31	47
Student & staff demographics	14	38	44
Referred by families/friends/agencies	17	36	42
Receipt of subsidy	24	28	43
Part-day option	31	27	38

Key Factors in Choosing ECE by Income

Across all income levels, families consistently prioritized children's experiences within programs over logistical considerations. Children's happiness and well-being and health and safety were the most frequently rated "very important" factors across all income tiers (Table 14). Some variation emerged by income in the relative emphasis placed on specific aspects of program quality. Families in Income Tiers 1A and 1B were more likely to prioritize staff education and credentials, highlighting the importance of program quality and professional expertise. Families in Income Tier 1B ranked children's school readiness among their top priorities, reflecting a stronger emphasis on early learning and preparation for kindergarten. Families in Income Tier 1B also placed high importance on teacher–parent relationships, while the three other tiers placed higher importance on teacher–child relationships and the physical environment. Families in Income Tier 3 ranked full-day/after-school care as one of the most important factors, likely reflecting a strong emphasis on aligning program schedules with family work and daily routines.

TABLE 14**Top Five Important Factors in Choosing ECE Programs by Income Levels**

Rank	Tier 1A ≤100% FPL	Tier 1B 101–300% FPL	Tier 2 301–600% FPL	Tier 3 >600% FPL
1	Health & safety	Child's happiness & well-being	Health & safety	Child's happiness & well-being
2	Child's happiness & well-being	Health & safety	Child's happiness & well-being	Health & safety
3	Physical environment	Teacher–parent relationships	Teacher–child relationships	Physical environment
4	Teacher–child relationships	Preparing for school readiness	Physical environment	Teacher–child relationships
5	Staff education/credentials	Staff education/credentials	Teacher–parent relationships	Full-day/after-school care

Key Factors in Choosing ECE by Race/Ethnicity

Table 15 shows that children's happiness and well-being was still the top-ranked factor across White, Black, and Hispanic families. White and Black families emphasized the importance of teacher–child relationships, while Hispanic families rated physical environment, such as the cleanliness and space, as one of their top three priorities. Health and safety also ranked among the top priorities for all racial and ethnic groups, though its relative position varied. In addition, differences emerged in how families emphasized specific dimensions of program quality. Teacher–parent relationships were also important for White and Hispanic families. Overall, these patterns suggested that while families across racial and ethnic groups share common priorities related to children's well-being and safety, they may differ in the specific aspects of ECE quality they value most.

TABLE 15**Top Five Important Factors in Choosing ECE Programs by Racial/Ethnic Groups**

Rank	White	Very Important (%)	Black	Very Important (%)	Hispanic	Very Important (%)
1	Child's happiness & well-being	65	Child's happiness & well-being	85	Child's happiness & well-being	89
2	Health & safety	65	Teacher–child relationships	84	Health & safety	86
3	Teacher–child relationships	61	Health & safety	80	Physical environment (cleanliness, space)	74
4	Teacher–parent relationships	59	Preparing children for school readiness/curriculum	79	Teacher–parent relationships	61
5	Physical environment (cleanliness, space)	56	Physical environment (cleanliness, space)	79	Locations/Teacher–child relationships	56

Key Factors in Choosing ECE by Special Needs

Table 16 compares the top five factors families considered when choosing ECE programs for children with and without special needs. For both groups, children's happiness and well-being and health and safety ranked among the most important factors, though their relative ordering differed. Families of children with special needs placed greater emphasis on the physical environment (e.g., cleanliness and space) and on programs' ability to meet their child's specific developmental or support needs. In contrast, families without children with special needs were more likely to prioritize teacher-child relationships and practical considerations such as location and transportation. Teacher-parent relationships were consistently important across both groups, appearing in the top five regardless of special needs status.

TABLE 16
Top Five Important Factors in Choosing ECE Programs for Children with Special Needs

Rank	With Special Needs	Very Important (%)	Without Special Needs	Very Important (%)
1	Child's happiness & well-being	80	Health & safety	69
2	Health & safety	75	Child's happiness & well-being	68
3	Physical environment (cleanliness, space)	72	Teacher-child relationships	67
4	Meeting child's special needs (e.g., disability spectrum)	67	Locations (distance/transportation)	63
5	Teacher-parent relationships	64	Teacher-parent relationships	63

DATA DIGEST

Key Factors in Choosing ECE Programs

- 1. Quality matters more than cost alone.** Across income levels, racial and ethnic groups, and special needs status, families consistently prioritize children's happiness and well-being and health and safety over logistical factors such as cost and location.
- 2. Families emphasize different aspects of quality depending on context.** Priorities vary modestly by income, race and ethnicity, and special needs status: some families emphasize staff credentials or school readiness, others focus on teacher-child relationships, physical environments, or programs' ability to meet children's special needs.
- 3. Relational environments are consistently valued.** Across all groups, families highlight the importance of positive relationships between teachers and children, as well as teachers and parents.

Overall, the findings show that investments in relational and environmental quality would align with family priorities.

Qualitative Insights: Priorities in Choosing ECE

Families also discussed their priorities when choosing ECE during interviews and focus groups. These priorities were closely aligned with survey findings, with **children's safety and happiness** consistently described as the most foundational considerations in ECE choices. Parents emphasized the importance of strong security systems in ECE, including "safety guardrails," "emergency alert systems," policies specifying that "only families can pick up children," and controlled building access through "buzz-in systems." In addition to physical safety, families also emphasized the importance of a "comfortable," "loving," and "caring" environment that supports children's emotional well-being.

The quality of education was also emphasized by families. Parents wanted to send their children to ECE settings "where they receive not only child care but also educational support." Multiple families described the importance of providing play-based curriculum, especially for young children. As one parent explained:

"I also feel like at such a young age, it really needs to be about having fun and experiences, so that's play-based learning. And... and then I would say academics, but that's, you know, definitely down on the list."

—A mother of two children, currently using a private ECE program

In addition, the opportunity for science learning and appropriate technology exposure was prioritized by some families. They believed that technology should be used intentionally and developmentally appropriately to promote children's readiness for school and "broaden their horizons with learning".

At the same time, families emphasized the need to control screen time for young children at ECE. As one parent put it: "But he's very young, at least not today. He hasn't seen any screens. So, the screen thing is something very important to me...his learning doesn't depend on screens."

Families also prioritized **teachers' qualifications and professional attitudes**, particularly educators' passion for child development and genuine care for children. One parent described how a teacher's enthusiasm shaped her perception of program quality:

"It became immediately clear that she [the teacher] was just incredibly passionate about her work... she was somebody who really, really cared about kids, and about her work, and was just fascinated by child development and everything."

—A mother of two children enrolled in public Pre-K

While the quality of ECE was emphasized, **affordability** was the most fundamental factor that most families prioritized when choosing ECE. Many parents described the challenge of balancing quality with cost, particularly for low-income families with limited options. One parent explained that although she valued curriculum quality, inclusivity, and specialized support services, she pointed out that "all those things... it's more money." Similarly, an immigrant parent who was still struggling with navigating the ECE system described:

"It can really depend on how much they charge before I take the child, because if it's something is so expensive, I cannot afford, so I just go with something that I can."

—A mother of two children, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

Language environment also emerged as a critical priority for immigrant families, particularly those families who did not speak English at home. Families emphasized the importance of communication between children and teachers to support both learning and emotional comfort. One mother described her frustration when her child struggled to understand instruction due to language barriers:

“There’s something that has hit me hard since I arrived [in Baltimore]. It’s been very hard for me here, and that is that children don’t have the ability to communicate with their teachers, with their caregivers, because they’re people who only speak one language....She [her daughter] told me: ‘I don’t want to go to school because I don’t understand my teacher.’ So that was very frustrating.”

—A mother of two children, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

Finally, ECE program **hours and locations** were frequently mentioned by families, especially for employed parents who needed to consider the commute time and transportation. Some parents who did not have access to vehicles preferred ECE within walking distance. As for working parents, the alignment between ECE operating hours and work schedules was prioritized, as one parent shared:

“The hours of operation is a big barrier, because there’s no before and after care for these programs... In order to have a job...It’s very difficult to work around those hours.”

—A mother of five children with experience in Head Start programs

Summary

Overall, families describe children’s safety and happiness as central considerations when making ECE decisions. Many families view these factors as foundational to children’s development and well-being. Families also emphasize the quality of care and education, including play-based learning, opportunities to engage with STEM and technology, and committed teachers. Affordability is an important consideration, particularly for families with fewer financial resources and immigrant families. Some non-English-speaking immigrant families also describe ECE as an opportunity to support their children’s communication skills. Program hours and location are also important, especially for working parents.

Taken together, these findings suggest that families consider multiple dimensions of ECE when making decisions, including safety, happiness, quality, affordability, accessibility, and fit with family needs. These findings point to the importance of continuing to strengthen ECE options in Baltimore City in ways that are responsive to families’ varied priorities and circumstances.

A photograph of a woman and a young girl sitting at a table, writing on a piece of paper. The woman is on the left, and the girl is on the right, holding a pen. The image has a blue and green color overlay. The text 'Chapter Four' is in a white rounded rectangle on the left.

Chapter Four

Challenges in Accessing Early Childhood Resources

Challenges in Accessing Early Childhood Resources

This chapter describes the challenges families face in finding ECE arrangements, drawing from both the survey and interview/focus group data. These findings provide insights into opportunities for reducing inequity and strengthening the current ECE systems in Baltimore City.

Challenges in Finding ECE

In the survey, more than one-third of families (34%) described their experiences finding ECE arrangements as difficult or very difficult. Table 17 presents the rank order of challenges that families encountered during this process. Most common challenges were related to the suitability of ECE programs for children's needs and families' schedules (48%), which may be particularly important for working parents. Affordability (46%) and limited availability of open seats (39%) were also commonly cited barriers to securing ECE arrangements. Open-ended responses reinforced these findings and highlighted how affordability challenges can affect families. A parent noted, "we aren't low-income, but we aren't wealthy so we didn't qualify for financial assistance and also had a hard time finding care we could afford."

TABLE 17
Challenges in ECE Arrangement

	%
Had trouble finding choices to suit my child's needs	48
Had trouble finding choices to suit my schedule	48
Most care was too expensive	46
Most programs were already filled	39
Had trouble finding good quality care	39
Friends or relatives who can provide child care were unavailable	30
Programs were too far away	29
I did not know where to begin looking	24
My child was too young for programs	16
Other problems	3

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

Challenges in Finding ECE by Income

Table 18 shows that while the overall pattern of challenges in securing ECE arrangements was broadly consistent across income tiers, the relative emphasis of specific barriers varied by income level. Families in Income Tiers 1A, 1B, and 2 were more likely to report difficulty finding ECE options that suited their child's needs and their family's schedules, highlighting challenges related to program fit and flexibility.

Families in Income Tier 3 most frequently cited limited availability and concerns about finding quality care as their top challenges. Families in Income Tier 1A listed affordability as the top concern, while families in Income Tier 1B ranked this concern lower than program fit and flexibility. Interestingly, families in Income Tier 2 also ranked affordability as the top concern. Although these families earned above 300% FPL, the eligibility or priority thresholds for many publicly funded ECE opportunities, they still reported difficulty balancing the cost of care and program availability. Families in this income tier may have earned too much to qualify for some public programs, yet not enough to afford private care. Even families in Income Tier 3 reported high costs as a challenge, showing affordability as widespread concern.

Together, these findings suggest that barriers to ECE access and affordability were experienced differently across income tiers. As a result, the city may benefit from more targeted, tiered strategies that address distinct needs related to affordability, scheduling flexibility, program availability, and quality across income levels.

TABLE 18
Challenges in ECE Arrangements by Income Levels

Rank	Tier 1A ≤100% FPL	%	Tier 1B 101–300% FPL	%	Tier 2 301–600% FPL	%	Tier 3 >600% FPL	%
1	Most care was too expensive	48	Had trouble finding choices to suit my child's needs	52	Most care was too expensive	52	Most programs were already filled	66
2	Had trouble finding choices to suit my child's needs	38	Had trouble finding choices to suit my schedule	52	Had trouble finding choices to suit my schedule	44	Had trouble finding good quality care	63
3	Had trouble finding choices to suit my schedule	38	Had trouble finding good quality care	45	Most programs were already filled	38	Most care was too expensive	63
4	Most programs were already filled	34	Most care was too expensive	40	Friends/relatives who could provide childcare were unavailable	35	Had trouble finding choices to suit my child's needs	50
5	Programs were too far away	30	Most programs were already filled	37	Had trouble finding good quality care	32	Had trouble finding choices to suit my schedule	50

Challenges in Finding ECE by Race/Ethnicity

While families across racial and ethnic groups experienced similar types of challenges in securing ECE arrangements, the relative importance of these challenges differed by group (Table 19). White and Hispanic families most commonly reported difficulty finding care that met their children's needs and accommodated their family schedules. Hispanic families were also more likely to report limited availability of informal care from friends or relatives, indicating additional constraints beyond formal ECE options.

In contrast, Black families most frequently identified affordability as the primary barrier to accessing ECE, followed by challenges related to program fit for children's needs and scheduling. Across all racial and ethnic groups, limited availability of open seats and difficulty finding high-quality care were also commonly cited. Together, these findings suggest that while families face overlapping barriers to ECE access, targeted strategies may be needed to address distinct challenges related to affordability, flexibility, and informal care availability across racial and ethnic groups.

TABLE 19
Challenges in ECE Arrangements by Racial/Ethnic Groups

Rank	White	(%)	Black	(%)	Hispanic	(%)
1	Had trouble finding choices to suit my child's needs	48	Most care was too expensive	60	Had trouble finding choices to suit my child's needs	52
2	Had trouble finding choices to suit my schedule	48	Had trouble finding choices to suit my child's needs	44	Had trouble finding choices to suit my schedule	52
3	Most programs were already filled	41	Had trouble finding choices to suit my schedule	44	Friends or relatives who can provide child care were unavailable	43
4	Had trouble finding good quality care	41	Most programs were already filled	40	Most care was too expensive	38
5	Most care was too expensive	40	Had trouble finding good quality care	36	Most programs were already filled	31

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

Challenges in Finding ECE by Special Needs

Table 20 presents the challenges families faced in securing ECE arrangements, comparing families with and without children with special needs. Families of children with special needs most frequently reported difficulty finding care that could adequately support their child's needs and accommodate their family schedules, with more than half identifying each as a barrier. They also commonly cited challenges related to finding good-quality care, affordability, and limited availability of open seats.

In contrast, families without children with special needs most often identified affordability as the primary barrier to accessing ECE, followed by difficulty finding options that fit their schedules. Limited availability of open seats, challenges in identifying good-quality care, and distance to programs were also frequently reported. Overall, these findings suggested that while families shared some common barriers, families of children with special needs faced additional challenges related to program fit and targeted support.

TABLE 20
Challenges in ECE Arrangements by Special Needs

Rank	With Special Needs	(%)	Without Special Needs	(%)
1	Lack of care options to support child's needs	55	Care was too expensive	47
2	Lack of care options to fit schedule	55	Lack of care options to fit schedule	43
3	Trouble finding good-quality care	46	Programs already full	38
4	Care was too expensive	42	Trouble finding good-quality care	34
5	Programs already full	39	Programs too far away	29

Note: Families were able to select more than one option.

DATA DIGEST

Challenges in Finding ECE

- 1. Families face system-level barriers indicating limited supply and fit.** Common challenges include program fit for children's needs, scheduling constraints, affordability, and limited availability.
- 2. Challenges vary by income.** Income Tiers 1A, 1B, and 2 families report greater difficulty finding care that fits children's needs and schedules, while Income Tier 3 families most often cite limited availability and quality concerns. Both Income Tier 1A and 2 rank high cost as their top challenge, perhaps because Tier 2 families earn above public eligibility thresholds.
- 3. Challenges also differ by race and ethnicity.** White and Hispanic families emphasize program fit and scheduling, Hispanic families report limited informal care, and Black families most frequently identify affordability as the primary barrier.
- 4. Families of children with special needs face additional access barriers.** These families are more likely to report difficulty finding care that can support their child's needs and fit family schedules, highlighting gaps in inclusive ECE options.

Overall, these findings point to the need for targeted ECE policies that address affordability, flexibility, and inclusive program capacity rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

Qualitative Insights: Challenges and Barriers in Accessing ECE

Families described multiple challenges and barriers in identifying appropriate ECE options during the interviews and focus groups. Cost and limited availability were the most frequently mentioned barriers, followed by the misalignment between operation hours and parents' work schedules, location constraints, difficulties in communication, complicated application processes, and limited accommodation for children with special needs and immigrant families.

Cost and Affordability

Difficulties in finding affordable ECE were experienced by families across income levels. Low-income families described that "child care is like a house payment," which was a heavy financial burden for them. While Child Care Scholarships are available for some private ECE programs, some families couldn't afford even the application fees for these programs, with one parent sharing that "it could be like a struggle for some parents to even come up with the application fee." Additionally, families living in marginalized communities found that finding affordable aftercare with a safe environment was difficult:

"I can't even afford to send them to aftercare... I would prefer a setting like house setting, but...then the decent areas where I would feel safe sending them to I can't afford it."

—A grandmother caring for two children, not currently using ECE programs

Families who were not eligible for Child Care Scholarship also described falling into a "coverage gap," where they earned too much to qualify for assistance, but still struggled to find affordable ECE. One parent shared:

"We don't qualify for a lot of the vouchers, and I understand it should go to people that need it more. But it ends up, like, we're in this space where we actually still need it, even if we don't really meet the guidelines."

—A mother of two children, currently using a home-based ECE program

In some cases, the high cost of child care harmed some parents' employment status. Several families, particularly immigrant families, described their experiences of quitting jobs because their earnings could not cover child care expenses:

"I'm losing my first job and second job because of child care. Yeah, because I have to, if I want to pay, what I make a day will not [be sufficient to] pay for child care."

—A mother of two children, currently enrolled in a private ECE program

Notably, families with a relatively higher income also had affordability concerns, with one mother sharing, "I make six figures, I still feel broke paying for child care, so I can't imagine someone who's making 50, 60K, and trying to cover child care." The strains of high child care costs existed across socioeconomic groups.

Limited Availability and Long Waitlists

In addition to the high cost, the limited availability of spots in ECE was another major barrier for families. Families described long waitlists, particularly for infant and toddler care options. Several parents shared that they were advised to contact ECE and place their children on waiting lists even before their children were born. This was especially stressful for mothers who needed child care shortly after parental leave ended.

Scheduling and Location Constraints

Many families also emphasized the challenges related to ECE operation hours and locations, particularly for working parents who tried to balance their employment and child care responsibilities. One parent described her challenges in finding child care close to her house or workplace:

"I needed someone I could entrust my children with... the one I got was far from where I stay...I looked for a place close to my house or close to my workplace, but I couldn't get any then, due to the one I got was far and it was expensive so that made me look for family caregiver."

—A mother of two with experience in home-based ECE programs

Similarly, another participant reported that she had to change her job or reduce hours to align with her child's care schedule.

As a result of the constraints of affordability and location, and limited infant-toddler ECE options, some families turned to the option with more flexibility: **nanny sharing**. One parent shared that:

"When we were originally looking, one of the barriers was just the existence of infant care. It's a lot harder to find infant care... So just finding somebody who had space...we interviewed nannies."

—A mother of one child with experience in private ECE programs and nanny sharing

Similarly, another parent shared that she considered both nanny sharing and child care support from family members, given the difficulties in finding ECE programs that fit her schedule needs:

"The schedule availability that we were looking for was difficult, and...the only places, really, that we found that could accommodate that kind of a schedule were very expensive, so... we've kind of made do for years with a combination of myself being part-time, my mother-in-law helping, a nanny share for a little while."

—A mother of one child with experience in nanny sharing, home-based, and private ECE programs

Communication and Information Barriers

Furthermore, families experienced difficulties in navigating the ECE system and obtaining relevant information. In particular, challenges in receiving timely responses from ECE programs were described. One parent shared the frustration with the limited communication channels with programs:

"We initially reached out to, [organization name], which was closer to us. And they never got back with us. They didn't have a telephone number for us to call. Well, we called a number, and they said, no, they'll be in contact with you via email. Signed up several times, never got a response or anything about that, so that was... crappy."

—A grandfather caring for one child, currently enrolled in a Head Start program

Another parent reported the unclear and complicated enrollment procedures:

"I just feel like the processes should be a little easier... You're filling out six forms...and they're sending you forms back, and I just feel like... you're giving up a whole bunch of stuff and time for something that's not really a guarantee."

—A mother of one child, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

Additional Barriers for Families of Children with Special Needs and Immigrant Families

Families of children with special needs faced additional barriers. One mother with a prematurely born baby shared her challenges in finding an ECE option that can accommodate her child's medical appointments and therapy needs:

"So my daughter, was born very prematurely, so she had a lot of medical needs, a lot of appointments, doctor's visits, but then also for a really long time, a lot of therapy appointments.... And so, having a part-time option [for ECE arrangements]...I went down to part-time at work in order to be able to accommodate those appointments for her, and so we really needed something, but I have to do kind of full days [for ECE arrangements], so, like, I work... had two days a week off to try to accommodate her appointments, so we were hoping to try to find something where we could have care just the days that I work... which is kind of difficult."

—A mother of one child who had experience using public Pre-K and nanny sharing

As for immigrant families, they often experienced overlapping barriers related to cost, documentation requirements, and eligibility criteria for Child Care Scholarship. Many of them struggled to maintain their employment status to be eligible for a Child Care Scholarship or other formal child care support. A single mother without a job shared her experiences of being rejected for Child Care Scholarship application:

"I have been submitting [applications] since April. It has been difficult, they keep on asking me for different things.... I keep on submitting, I keep getting denied, I keep on applying. No, they just said that I have to present my salary with receipts...I cannot because... I no working."

"They rejected an application from April... They said [the approved training program that the participant attended] needs to...bring another letter that says that I am already working, like, but I can't work with the baby. I need to give the baby in the child care. They said no, the [training program] should bring a pay slip...I have not started, how can I present a receipt of my pay?"

—A mother of one child, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

Likewise, another immigrant mother shared that she had no income and was managing child care on her own while her husband was not in the United States. Without additional caregiving or financial support, she was unable to seek a job, which in turn prevented her from meeting the employment requirements needed to qualify for the Child Care Scholarship, even during the program's grace period:

"I don't have a job. I haven't been working because I've been taking care of my son because his father was sent back to his country, to Mexico. And I was left with my children. And the truth is, I don't have the resources, which is like paying for the child's expenses."

—A mother of four children, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

Summary

Overall, the insights from families' interviews and focus groups suggest that most of the barriers to accessing ECE are more systemic rather than individual. These barriers affect families across socioeconomic status, and are particularly acute for low-income families, families of children with special needs, and immigrant families. Some efforts that can be taken to support these families include expanding affordable infant-toddler child care slots and simplifying the application procedures for Child Care Scholarships and ECE enrollment. In addition, strengthening the communication and support for families living in marginalized communities and immigrant families can help them better navigate the ECE system; otherwise, they may need to rely on ECE options that do not meet their children's developmental and safety needs.

Chapter Five

Knowledge of Early Childhood Resources and Outreach Recommendations

Knowledge of Early Childhood Resources and Outreach Recommendations

This chapter describes families' knowledge of ECE options, school readiness, program quality ratings, and early childhood resources in Baltimore City. In addition, it presents the ways families seek information about early childhood services and resources, including the channels they used and their preferred methods for receiving outreach and support for ECE arrangements. These findings can provide actionable strategies for how early childhood resources can be more effectively disseminated to reach more families.

Families' Knowledge of Early Childhood Resources

Parents and families reported their knowledge of child care options, school readiness, and child development resources available to them (Table 21). A large majority of families agreed or strongly agreed that they knew where to go if they had questions about child care options (71%) or their child's development (69%). In addition, many of them felt they understood school readiness (70%) and had the resources and means to support their children's school readiness (69%).

About 65% of families were confident about their knowledge of different child care options in their communities. However, only 20% of families selected "strongly agree" and over 25% of them selected "neutral" for this statement. Additionally, 69% of families reported that they understand the child care quality rating system in Baltimore (Maryland EXCELS).

TABLE 21

Families' Knowledge of ECE and School Readiness

	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
I am aware of different child care options in my communities.	0	10	25	45	20
If I have questions about child care options, I know where to go.	0	17	22	39	22
If I have questions about my child's development, I know where to go.	0	12	19	43	26
I understand what it means to be school-ready for my child.	0	9	22	41	29
I feel that I have the resources and means to get my child school-ready.	0	10	20	39	31
I understand what child care quality rating is, such as EXCELS.	0	10	21	43	26

Note: Families were asked to indicate to what extent they agree with these statements. Percentages are presented. No participants selected "Strongly disagree."

Families' Knowledge of Resources by Income

Table 22 presents the notable differences in families' knowledge of child care options and school readiness across income tiers. Families in Income Tier 3 reported higher levels of knowledge about child care options and school readiness compared to families in other income tiers. For instance, 94% of these families agreed that they were aware of different child care options in their communities, compared to 79% in Income Tier 2, 58% in Income Tier 1B, and 48% in Income Tier 1A. Interestingly, families in Income Tiers 1B, 2, and 3 were less likely to report understanding of children's school readiness than families in Income Tier 1A. While families in Income Tier 1A were the most likely to report understanding of children's school readiness, they were the least likely to feel that they had the resources and means to get their children school-ready.

TABLE 22

Families' Knowledge of ECE and School Readiness by Income Levels

	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)			
	Tier 1A ≤100% FPL	Tier 1B 101–300% FPL	Tier 2 301–600% FPL	Tier 3 >600% FPL
I am aware of different child care options in my communities.	48	58	79	94
If I have questions about child care options, I know where to go.	43	57	72	74
If I have questions about my child's development, I know where to go.	63	64	77	74
I understand what it means to be school-ready for my child.	85	63	75	74
I feel that I have the resources and means to get my child school-ready.	56	64	79	94
I understand what child care quality rating is, such as EXCELS.	72	68	68	80

Families' Knowledge of Resources by Race/Ethnicity

Families' knowledge of ECE and school readiness varied by race and ethnicity (Table 23). In particular, Hispanic families reported lower levels of knowledge about child care options, school readiness, and quality rating compared to other families. Only 39% of Hispanic families were confident about their awareness of different child care options in their communities, whereas 71% of White families and 63% of Black families reported their awareness of different child care options. Additionally, Hispanic families had fewer channels to ask questions about child care options and their child's development, with only about 40% of them reporting that they knew where to go when they had child care questions. In contrast, over 60% of White and Black families were aware of where to go when questions arose. This finding may be related to the lack of formal resources and support in Hispanic communities or the limited channels to share this information with Hispanic families.

TABLE 23
Families' Knowledge of ECE and School Readiness by Racial/Ethnic Groups

	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)		
	White	Black	Hispanic
I am aware of different child care options in my communities.	71	63	39
If I have questions about child care options, I know where to go.	64	62	43
If I have questions about my child's development, I know where to go.	71	74	41
I understand what it means to be school-ready for my child.	71	78	59
I feel that I have the resources and means to get my child school-ready.	74	68	52
I understand what child care quality rating is, such as EXCELS.	71	70	57

Families' Knowledge of Resources by Special Needs

We conducted subgroup analysis for families with and without children with special needs. Overall, there were no significant differences between these two groups. They reported similar levels of knowledge of ECE options, school readiness, and program ratings, which were consistent with the patterns observed in the full sample.

Families' Familiarity with Early Childhood Resources

To ensure families' awareness and access to needed resources, we aimed to understand to what extent families were familiar with the local early childhood and family resources in Baltimore City, including Judy Centers, LOCATE, B'more for Healthy Babies, Maryland Family Network, Baltimore City Childcare Resource Center, The Family Tree, and Maryland Coalition of Families (Table 24). Most families (over 70%) reported being somewhat familiar or familiar with these listed resources. However, nearly 30% of them were not familiar with these sources of information and support. In the interviews, while several parents mentioned that they had used LOCATE to search for ECE options, many of them shared that they were not fully aware of these different types of early childhood resources and organizations.

These findings suggest that while substantial resources exist to help families navigate ECE systems in Baltimore City, more efforts are needed to strengthen families' awareness of the availability of these resources and reduce information gaps.

TABLE 24**Families' Familiarity with Local Early Childhood Resources and Programs**

	Not familiar (%)	Somewhat familiar (%)	Familiar (%)
Judy Centers	30	35	35
LOCATE: Child Care	28	33	39
B'more for Healthy Babies	30	35	36
Maryland Family Network	27	36	38
Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center	30	35	36
The Family Tree	33	37	31
Maryland Coalition of Families	33	33	35

Note: Families were asked to indicate to what extent they are familiar with these resources and information.

Early Childhood Resources Information

Judy Center Early Learning Hubs

Judy Center Early Learning Hubs are not child care centers; instead, they serve as comprehensive hubs where families can engage in learning experiences with their children from prenatal stages through age 5 and access support services. Using a multigenerational approach, Judy Centers focus on families and children.

LOCATE: Child Care

LOCATE: Child Care is a free and confidential referral service that will help families find child care. The program is affiliated with all of Maryland's regulated child care providers. Their referral options include: Child care, Center-based care facilities, private kindergartens, private nursery schools, Head Start programs, school-age and after-school programs.

Maryland Family Network

Maryland Family Network (MFN) is the statewide coordinating entity for the Maryland Child Care Resource Network. Through MFN, families and child care providers across Maryland connect to resources that support high-quality, affordable, and accessible child care. In addition to running referral services such as LOCATE: Child Care, MFN provides training, quality improvement support, and policy advocacy aimed at strengthening early childhood care and education statewide.

The Family Tree

The Family Tree is a nonprofit organization that, among other services, hosts the Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center.

Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center

Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center serves as the hub for issues relating to the care and education of young children in the City of Baltimore.

B'more for Healthy Babies

The B'more for Healthy Babies initiative works to strengthen policy, systems, healthcare services, and community support for women and families throughout the life course and address the social, economic, and racial inequities that affect health. Their vision is that all Baltimore's Babies are born at a healthy weight, full term, and ready to thrive in healthy families and communities.

Maryland Coalition of Families

The Maryland Coalition of Families offers family peer support to people and families who have a loved one experiencing mental health, substance use, or problem gambling challenges.

Families' Familiarity with Early Childhood Resources by Income

Table 25 demonstrates information gaps across income tiers. While Judy Centers are primarily located within Title I schools and communities with higher rates of economic disadvantages, families in Income Tiers 2 and 3 (47% and 49%, respectively) reported the highest familiarity with Judy Centers compared to families in Income Tiers 1A (22%) and 1B (30%). In addition, compared to other income groups, Income Tier 3 families were more likely to be familiar with the LOCATE: Child Care and Income Tiers 2 and 3 families were more likely to be familiar with Maryland Family Network, which help families navigate ECE systems and financial support in Baltimore City. This suggested that families who had the most need for early childhood resources could be least aware of them. Some organizations, however, could have better reach to these families: families in Income Tier 1A reported greater familiarity with Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center and families in Income Tier 1B were more familiar with Maryland Coalition of Families.

TABLE 25

Families' Familiarity with Early Childhood Resources by Income Levels

Resource (Familiar %)	Tier 1A ≤100% FPL (%)	Tier 1B 101–300% FPL (%)	Tier 2 301–600% FPL (%)	Tier 3 >600% FPL (%)
Judy Centers	22	30	47	49
LOCATE: Child Care	44	38	38	51
B'more for Healthy Babies	40	34	38	32
Maryland Family Network	26	31	52	51
Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center	47	39	33	12
The Family Tree	15	36	31	20
Maryland Coalition of Families	21	40	37	31

Families' Familiarity with Early Childhood Resources by Race/Ethnicity

Families' familiarity with local early childhood resources also varied across racial and ethnic groups (Table 26). More White families reported familiarity with the listed resources compared to Black and Hispanic families. For example, 45% of White families were familiar with LOCATE: Child Care, compared to 36% of Black families and 19% of Hispanic families reporting familiarity. In addition, 43% of White families were familiar with Judy Centers, while 27% of Black families and 23% Hispanic families reported familiarity.

Across the full set of resources in the survey, Hispanic families were least likely to report familiarity, with the notable exception of the Maryland Coalition of Families. This suggests that their outreach approach may be especially effective in engaging Hispanic families and would be worth examining as a potential model for improving dissemination efforts across the ECE system.

In the interviews and focus groups, Hispanic families and immigrant families were most likely to discuss the lack of channels to seek early childhood information and resources. This could be related to the unequal access to information across communities, language barriers, and different levels of trust in public agencies and institutions.

TABLE 26**Families' Familiarity with Early Childhood Resources by Racial/Ethnic Groups**

Resource (Familiar %)	White (%)	Black (%)	Hispanic (%)
Judy Centers	43	27	23
LOCATE: Child Care	45	36	19
B'more for Healthy Babies	35	38	26
Maryland Family Network	40	36	23
Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center	37	39	23
The Family Tree	37	24	19
Maryland Coalition of Families	40	24	40

Families' Familiarity with Early Childhood Resources by Special Needs

Table 27 presents comparisons of families' familiarity with early childhood resources between families with and without children with special needs. Across all seven resources, families with special needs children consistently reported higher familiarity with these resources compared to families without special needs children. In particular, 49% of families with special needs reported familiarity with the Maryland Coalition of Families, compared to 27% of families without special needs. Likewise, 48% of families with special needs reported familiarity with the Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center, while only 29% of families without special needs reported familiarity. This could be related to the fact that these organizations directly provided disability-related services, and families of children with special needs were more likely to actively seek or be referred to these specialized resource networks.

TABLE 27**Families' Familiarity with Early Childhood Resources by Special Needs**

Resource (Familiar %)	With Special Needs	Without Special Needs
Judy Centers	42	32
LOCATE: Child Care	44	36
B'more for Healthy Babies	43	32
Maryland Family Network	43	34
Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center	48	29
The Family Tree	37	27
Maryland Coalition of Families	49	27

DATA DIGEST

Awareness of Early Childhood Resources and ECE Options

- 1. Most families feel generally informed but lack confidence in navigating specific options.** While about 70% of families report knowing where to go with questions about child care, child development, and school readiness, far fewer feel strongly confident about understanding the full range of child care options in their communities.
- 2. Knowledge gaps vary by income.** Income Tier 3 families consistently report greater knowledge of child care options, access to school readiness resources, and quality ratings. While families in Income Tier 1A are the most likely to report understanding children's school readiness, they are the least likely to feel that they have access to school-readiness resources.
- 3. Hispanic families report substantially lower knowledge and familiarity with resources.** Compared to White and Black families, Hispanic families are less likely to report knowing where to seek information about child care, child development, and quality ratings, and are least familiar with most early childhood resources.
- 4. Awareness of early childhood resources remains uneven across families.** Although most families report some familiarity with local resources, nearly one-third are not familiar with key organizations such as Judy Centers, LOCATE: Child Care, and the Family Tree, indicating missed opportunities to connect families to existing support.
- 5. Some outreach models appear more effective for specific populations.** The Maryland Coalition of Families is a notable exception in reaching Hispanic families and families of children with special needs, suggesting that its outreach strategies may offer useful lessons for improving culturally responsive and targeted dissemination across the ECE system.

Qualitative Insights: Information Access and Sharing of ECE Resources

Resources Familiarity and Knowledge

Although nearly half of the families who participated in the interviews and focus groups reported being somewhat familiar with available ECE resources, many described limited clarity about where to find reliable information or how to identify ECE options that aligned with their needs. For example, several participants described their knowledge of Maryland EXCELS ratings as vague, "I'm not entirely sure," "I know they have stars," or "I'm kind of familiar with it." Others reported even lower levels of awareness, sharing that they "didn't even look at [ECE] ratings" or had "no idea how this works." Their uncertainty about ECE knowledge and resources could suggest gaps in the accessibility of ECE information.

How Families Find Information & Trustworthy Resources

To better understand how ECE resources and information can be effectively disseminated to families, we asked participants how they typically search for and access information about ECE resources. Families described four primary pathways for finding ECE information: 1) online sources, including websites and social media platforms; 2) informal networks, such as conversations with friends, family members, neighbors, and other community members, particularly those with young children; 3) information shared through public agencies and nonprofit organizations; and 4) direct outreach to ECE programs, including phone calls and in-person visits.

Online Sources

Many families searched for ECE information either through Google search or social media platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp groups. Families frequently mentioned their use of Facebook parenting groups to find ECE resources or to look for nannies. Others would go to the official website of Baltimore City Public Schools and the Mayor's Office website.

Informal Networks

Families also shared their preferences for using informal networks. Many of them relied on their friends and neighbors for information, especially those who also had young children. Some of them mentioned the potential difficulties parents may face when using the internet, as one parent shared:

“Word of mouth has worked best for me... because I’m not very technological. But I feel like all those apps have been really stressful for me. So mostly, I always use word of mouth like asking one person or another and they’ll guide me.”

—A mother of two, currently enrolled in public Pre-K

Some parents also mentioned asking co-workers, while others mentioned reaching out to community organizations and churches.

Public Agencies and Nonprofit Organizations

Public agencies and nonprofit organizations were also frequently mentioned platforms that families used to seek child care information resources, especially Baltimore’s public libraries, Maryland Family Network, and Family Tree. Other parents also mentioned that some resource fairs hosted within their community were helpful. Participants described their use of the Maryland EXCELS and LOCATE websites to find ECE programs and options that might meet their needs. In addition, the ECE flyers that were distributed at their workplaces or other places in their communities were helpful for some parents. One parent shared her appreciation of the collaboration between the nonprofit organization LOCATE and their employer when she tried to find a nanny:

“Trying to figure out how to hire a nanny, thank God for the nonprofit LOCATE, my work at the time had a contract with them to assist any employee for free, and so, I was able to call them and get a list of three- to-five-day child care that fit our needs, whether it was cost, location, type of facility, or childcare. But also they provided information on how to effectively evaluate facilities and what to look for in childcare. And that was so incredibly helpful.”

—A mother of one, currently using a nanny share

Suggestions for Future Information Sharing

When asked the best way to share information with families about ECE programs and support, families suggested three main channels: 1) social media, 2) personal messages, and 3) community events/displays, which were consistent with what they usually used to search ECE-related information.

For information sharing on social media platforms, families frequently mentioned Facebook parenting groups and emphasized the importance of “making sure that the information is easily accessible” and having “well-organized information portal or information site pages.”

Some parents preferred text messages or emails. They expressed safety concerns for “door-to-door” information sharing and felt that “text messages, receiving email” is more effective.

Information sharing at community events, such as child care fairs and panels, was also suggested by families. These could also include information displays around the city, such as at the schools of older siblings, the state Motor Vehicle Administration, doctors' offices, local public playgrounds, and libraries. One parent also noted that the City Schools can serve as an effective communication channel for sharing ECE-related information, as families often have older siblings enrolled in the school system. One parent shared:

"I also think, like, anytime a parent interacts with a city or state agency, there should be information. Like, if I'm going to the DMV, why is there not something there? Like, if I'm going downtown to the City Hall for whatever reason. Like, we should be sharing stuff about public services in public places so that all of us are working together to achieve the same goals and communicate the same information."

—A mother of two children, with experience in public Pre-K and home-based ECE programs

Another participant who expressed preferences for in-person information sharing described that:

"I feel like social media is more of, like, not so trusted for me, but I feel like when it comes to in-person, I would actually prefer that. That gives me a chance to actually, you know, ask my questions directly, and then get some answers directly."

—A father of two children, currently enrolled in a private ECE program

Families also mentioned the need to provide ECE information and resources in languages other than English and have bilingual staff, with one parent sharing that:

"Well, always try to have the information in both English and Spanish. That's one of the main ones, and second, that these types of centers have more bilingual staff or at least have a translator. Generally, there aren't."

—A mother of two, currently enrolled in a Head Start program

Summary

Taken together, these findings suggest that improving families' access to ECE resources and support requires not only an increase in the availability of information but also promoting accessibility and trust in how information is shared. Since families rely on a mix of online platforms, informal networks, and public agencies, communication strategies can be improved by disseminating information across these channels rather than relying solely on an official website. In addition, families consistently describe higher trust in information shared through community-based organizations, Baltimore City Public Schools, libraries, nonprofits, employers, and peer networks. Supporting these trusted messengers can improve families' access to more accurate and timely ECE information and resources.

Chapter Six

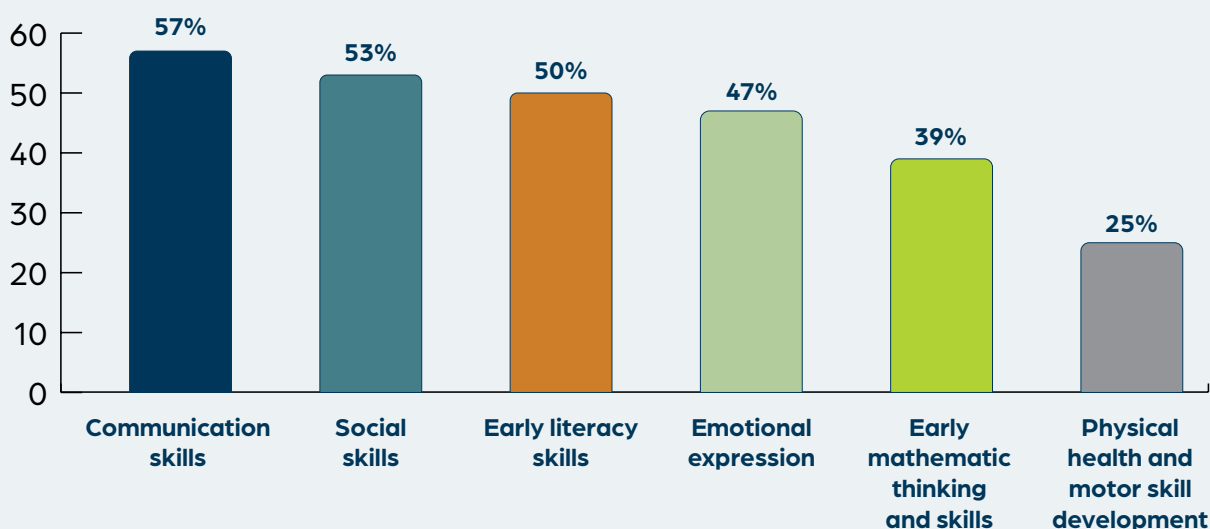
Families' Perceptions of School Readiness

Family-Perceived School Readiness Skills

Understanding families' priorities for their children's school readiness is critical for designing learning activities and promoting public early childhood support. Figure 4 presents families' ratings of important skills for their children's school readiness. Families rated communication skills (57%) as the most important skills for their children's development, followed by social skills (53%), early literacy (50%), and emotional expression (47%). While still viewed as important, fewer families selected early mathematical thinking and skills (39%) and physical health and motor skills development (25%).

FIGURE 4

Families' Perceived Most Important Skills for Children's School Readiness



Note: We asked participants to select the top three important skills.

Family-Perceived School Readiness Skills by Income

Table 28 presents families' priorities in children's school readiness skills by income levels. Across all income tiers, families consistently emphasized the importance of communication and social-emotional skills. However, the relative balance between academic skills and interpersonal development varied by income.

Families in Income Tiers 1A placed the greatest emphasis on academics, listing early literacy skills, communication skills, and early math skills as top priorities. Families in Income Tier 1B identified communication skills as their top priority, with early literacy skills and social skills ranked closely behind. Families in Income Tier 2 most frequently prioritized social skills and placed particularly strong emphasis on social-emotional development and communication skills as critical components of school readiness. Similarly, families in Income Tier 3 ranked communication skills as the most important, followed by social skills, then emotional development.

TABLE 28**Important Skills for Children's School Readiness by Income Levels**

Rank	Tier 1A ≤100% FPL	%	Tier 1B 101–300% FPL	%	Tier 2 301–600% FPL	%	Tier 3 >600% FPL	%
1	Early literacy skills	62	Communication skills	55	Social skills	64	Communication skills	77
2	Communication skills	60	Early literacy skills	54	Emotional expression	59	Social skills	69
3	Early mathematic thinking	48	Social skills	46	Communication skills	50	Emotional expression	60

Note: We asked participants to select the top three important skills.

Family-Perceived School Readiness Skills by Race/Ethnicity

Families' priorities for school readiness skills differed by their racial and ethnic backgrounds (Table 29). White families placed greater emphasis on communication and social-emotional skills. Black families prioritized academic skills, including early literacy and math, alongside communication skills. Hispanic families identified social skills, communication skills, and early literacy as their top three priorities for children's school readiness.

TABLE 29**Important Skills for Children's School Readiness by Racial/Ethnic Groups**

Rank	White	%	Black	%	Hispanic	%
1	Communication skills	56	Early literacy skills	66	Social skills	56
2	Social skills	54	Communication skills	57	Early literacy skills	49
3	Emotional expression	45	Early mathematic skills	46	Communication skills	49

Note: We asked participants to select the top three important skills.

Family-Perceived School Readiness Skills by Special Needs

We also conducted the subgroup analysis comparing families with and without children with special needs. There were no significant differences between these two groups, and both groups demonstrated consistent patterns with the full sample.

Qualitative Insights: Perceptions of School Readiness

Consistent with the findings in the survey, families emphasized the importance of children's social and emotional development over academic skills when describing school readiness in the interviews and focus groups. Families frequently described the significance of helping young children with regulating emotions and building relationships with peers and adults. As one parent described:

"I want her to be able to say hello to classmates, and introduce herself, and share without screaming, and have a conversation with adults at school if she's uncomfortable about something...I personally am much more concerned with her ability to interact with other people, to regulate her emotions, and to learn to enjoy school and learning."

—A mother of one who had used nanny sharing and public Pre-K

Similarly, other participants suggested that the critical role of teachers in supporting children's emotion regulation at the ECE stage:

"I really think that what's so important at this age is really sort of the socio-emotional learning, you know, learning how to regulate emotions, learning how to engage with others, learning how to resolve conflict."

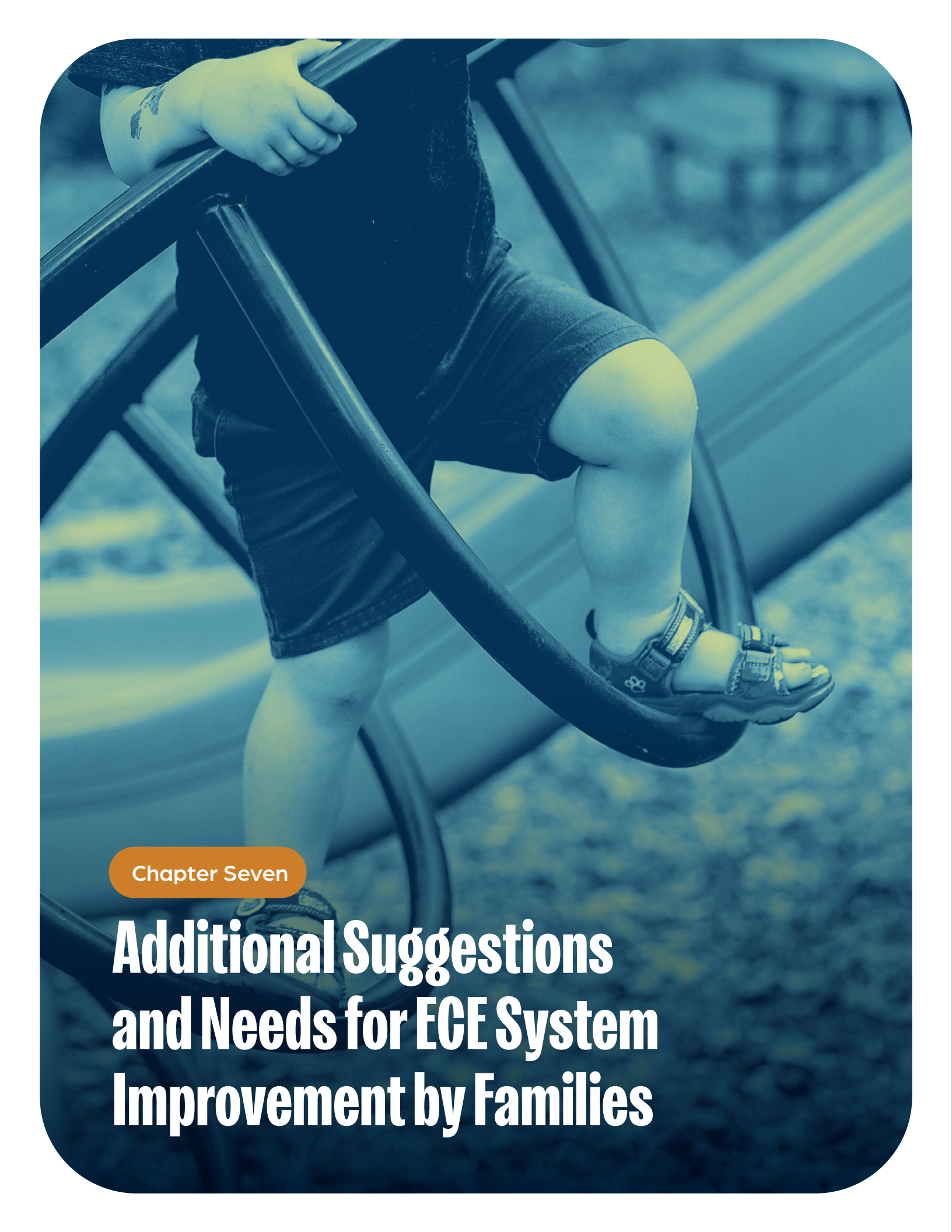
—A mother of one, currently enrolled in a private ECE program

"He's a 2-year-old, so he has, like, tantrums, and he goes through these, like, emotions, big emotions... sometimes I feel like I don't have the tools, and so, like, if there was another, experienced teacher there to, like, help him navigate that, I think that'd be a big thing for that preschool time."

—A mother of two, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

Families also recognized the importance of building early academic knowledge and skills. Several parents described basic numeracy, letter recognition, and early language exposure as valuable for school readiness.

Overall, both the survey findings and interview/focus group results suggested that families placed more emphasis on foundational communication and social-emotional skills that help children build relationships and regulate emotions, and they viewed academic and physical development as still critical but less urgent components of school readiness.

A photograph of a child climbing a playground structure, specifically a set of parallel bars. The child is wearing a dark t-shirt, dark shorts, and sandals. The image has a strong blue color cast. The child's right leg is extended upwards, and their right foot is gripping one of the bars. Their left hand is also gripping a bar. The background is blurred, showing more of the playground and some foliage.

Chapter Seven

Additional Suggestions and Needs for ECE System Improvement by Families

Additional Suggestions and Needs for ECE System Improvement by Families

When asked about the additional resources or support that Baltimore families should receive to help care for their children, families shared their suggestions on three key areas in the open-ended responses in the survey and during the interviews/focus groups: 1) improvement of the overall ECE system, 2) wellness and material support for families, and 3) additional benefits for educators who are also parents. These additional recommendations reflect priority areas for policy and system-level improvement.

Improvement of the Overall ECE System

Regarding the overall improvement of the ECE system, families' suggestions mainly focused on financial support, the accessibility of ECE options, and transportation support.

Financial Support and Affordability

Aligned with the barriers and experiences shared by families in the survey, many families emphasized the need for increased financial support to make ECE more affordable, benefiting parents who struggle to balance their employment, caregiving responsibilities and the high cost of ECE options. As parents shared:

"National struggle of, like, child care costs, and returning to work, and paid leave, and things like that. That is not just a Baltimore City issue. But anything that can be done to encourage those things or advocate for improvements in that would be good."

—A mother of one child, who had used nanny sharing and home-based ECE programs

"I think additional support that parents need are more vouchers, and finding out about more free, child care places, because I got lucky and found a free child care place, but not so many parents are lucky."

—A mother of three children, currently using a Head Start program

The need for financial support was particularly pronounced for families with infants and toddlers. One parent shared:

"I think subsidizing more child care, just so that, especially when you're looking for infant care and everything's really expensive. If... money weren't such a huge factor, then people would feel much more supported."

—A mother of one child, enrolled in a private ECE program

In addition to the direct support for families, participants also emphasized the importance of supporting the ECE workforce as a strategy to improve affordability and quality of ECE. Families recognized that low wages and limited professional support might contribute to the instability and uneven quality among ECE educators. As one parent shared:

"I think just the overall quality, I think pay for teachers and child care providers, and the ability to retain people, and... put time and effort into training them."

—A mother of one child who had used private ECE programs

Strengthening the Accessibility of Diverse ECE Options

Reducing the structural barriers to access ECE programs across Baltimore City was consistently suggested by families. In particular, families described the need for support in the application process, as one parent shared:

"I just feel like the processes should be a little easier. I feel like this with all government programs, this is why I really don't indulge in any of them ... I feel like they're not really very welcoming."

—A mother of one child, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

In addition, geographic accessibility was another concern that parents shared in the survey and interviews. Families living in neighborhoods with fewer ECE options described their struggles in finding high-quality ECE programs with available open seats:

"We're in Baltimore City, but it ends up we're, like, closer to the county, so there's, like... I feel like resources are more concentrated in, like, the heart of the city, or in some neighborhoods. And I guess some neighborhoods, like mine, there's not much going on here. And I think having more options all over, that are available everywhere in the city..."

—A mother of two children, currently enrolled in a private ECE program

"I live in a densely populated neighborhood and there are only two child care centers in walking distance, neither of them serves children under two and a half or 3... My child will be attending a preschool that is a 20-minute walk from my house in September because it is the closest center that had availability. There are two Head Start centers closer to my home than the preschool we will use, but we don't qualify for access to this program."

—A mother of one child, currently using informal care

Transportation Support

Several families suggested the need for a more consistent transportation system in Baltimore City, which would particularly benefit families without access to a personal vehicle. One parent shared that she had to withdraw her son from Early Head Start because of transportation difficulties:

"Transportation, because that's why I actually had to pull my son out of Early Head Start. But, that was the last straw... because, again... I don't have a car."

—A mother of one child, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

In addition, parents acknowledged the availability of ECE resources across Baltimore City; however, they also shared the difficulty in accessing these resources without reliable transportation, with one parent describing:

"And so, there's a lot of resources, but they are all a drive. In terms of child care, I would not be able to walk my child anywhere. It all would be a 10-minute car ride, no matter what. So I do think that is somewhat limiting as well."

—A mother to one child, currently using nanny sharing

Related to tardiness and absenteeism, parents emphasized the need for a more reliable transportation system. One parent shared:

"I also believe there are serious issues with transportation for all students in Baltimore City. This leads to chronic tardiness, absenteeism, and ultimately low graduation rates. A transportation system designed specifically for all students that doesn't involve the need to contract or use MTA would be a huge support in students accessing quality care and education."

—A mother of one child, currently using a home-based ECE program

Wellness Resources and Material Support for Families

Several families described the need for accessing wellness support, such as therapy and counseling, for both parents' and children's mental health. One parent suggested that when provided early, therapy and counseling can contribute to children's development. Another parent, who is a single mother of five, specifically shared the importance of early mental health support for children who experience stress or trauma within the home environment:

"Staying on top of mental health is a big thing in starting the normalization of going to therapy or having a counselor, or something like that, even at this early age, is a great thing to have, because there's a stigma about it. And... I know my whole family suffers from mental health issues, and I know a lot of my trauma and things that I went through as a child could have been avoided and helped if I would have had that early education ... of therapy."

—A mother of five children, with experience in Head Start programs

In addition to wellness services, families also described the needs related to basic child care materials, such as diapers and food. These are particularly important for immigrant families and those who have limited and unstable income sources, as one immigrant mother shared:

"They are there, but the materials may not be there. So you can have some resources... like food pantries, public food pantries...but it's a challenge [to access basic child care materials such as] diapers..."

—A mother of two children, currently enrolled in a private ECE program

Support for Parents Who Are Both Educators and Parents

Several participants identified themselves as both parents of young children and members of the ECE or K–12 workforce. Unfortunately, this group of families described that the low compensation, limited family leave, and insufficient child care support for the education workforce made it difficult for them to balance their jobs with child caregiving responsibilities.

One participant suggested the need for “providing caretakers with more sustainable wages.” Similarly, other participants emphasized the need for guaranteed family leave and employer-supported child care options for educators. A parent who worked as a teacher in the Baltimore City Public Schools system shared her challenges of finding after-school programs for her own children while working with other families’ children:

“There needs to be a priority around teachers...whoever is working, like, full-time in your school building, there needs to be some sort of assistance for them, because ... we are fighting just like the parents. I have to stop my service that I’m doing to somebody else’s child to try to figure out what I’m going to do with my child, and then we’re not accommodating because I cannot bring my child to work.”

—A mother of one child, not currently enrolled in ECE programs

The background is a solid blue color with a fine, grainy texture. Overlaid on this are shadows cast by three white poles, which appear as dark, intersecting lines. A bright yellow circle is also visible in the upper left quadrant, partially obscured by the shadows.

Chapter Eight

Recommendations and Next Steps

Recommendations and Next Steps

Findings from this study indicate that while important progress has been made in the city through publicly funded programs and Pre-K expansion, families continue to face significant barriers related to affordability, availability, program hours, geographic access, and system navigation.

Families' strong interest in public Pre-K points to the need for a clear commitment to universal access, while preserving a mixed-delivery system that offers meaningful choices for families across public schools, Head Start, community-based centers, family child care, and other settings.

The following recommendations are grounded in families' lived experiences and aligned with implementation priorities under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

Because these priorities are interconnected, progress will require coordinated action across Baltimore City Public Schools, public agencies, ECE providers, community organizations, and state partners.

1. Make Publicly Funded Pre-K Universally Available for 3- and 4-Year-Olds

Families across all income and racial and ethnic groups express strong interest in public Pre-K. Baltimore City should work toward guaranteeing access to a high-quality, publicly funded Pre-K option for all 3- and 4-year-olds whose families want to enroll them, regardless of income, neighborhood, language, disability, or family circumstances. We recommend:

- Expanding capacity across public schools and qualified community-based providers until all families seeking a publicly funded Pre-K seat for a 3- or 4-year-old can enroll.
- Preserving meaningful family choice within the mixed-delivery system, including public school, Head Start, and community-based settings.
- Using an equity-centered implementation strategy that prioritizes children and families facing the greatest barriers while building toward universal access at both ages.
- Ensuring that expanded Pre-K access is accompanied by inclusive services, services in languages other than English, practical program hours, and clear information about enrollment and placement.

2. Expand Infant, Toddler, and Flexible Care Supply

Access inequities are greatest during infancy and toddlerhood, when care is least affordable and available. Families also value smaller and more flexible arrangements. We recommend:

Providing targeted grants, incentives, and technical assistance to expand high-quality infant and toddler slots.

- Prioritizing expansion in neighborhoods with the largest gaps between family demand and available supply.
- Supporting family child care networks, small-center models, and shared-services approaches.
- Expanding access to Judy Centers and other family-centered support services for families with infants and toddlers.
- Developing practical guidance on contracts, safety, and quality for families using nanny shares or other shared-care arrangements.

3. Address Affordability Gaps Across the ECE Continuum

Families with low to moderate incomes often face a gap between eligibility for public assistance and the actual cost of private ECE. These pressures were especially evident among families earning between 101% and 600% of the federal poverty level. We recommend:

- Expanding sliding-scale assistance and other financial support beyond current eligibility thresholds.
- Simplifying access to the Child Care Scholarship and providing clear guidance on eligibility, documentation, and renewal requirements.
- Reexamining employment- and activity-based eligibility requirements in the Child Care Scholarship system that may prevent families from obtaining care while seeking work, education, or training.
- Increasing awareness of publicly funded ECE options and available financial support through trusted community channels.

4. Increase Seat Availability and Coordinate Enrollment

Long waitlists and limited openings prevent families from securing preferred ECE options. We recommend:

- Increasing publicly funded seats in neighborhoods and age groups with the highest unmet demand.
- Developing more timely and accurate information about openings and waitlists across participating providers.
- Exploring coordinated enrollment, referral, and waitlist systems that reduce duplicative applications and connect families to available alternatives.
- Using application, waitlist, enrollment, and neighborhood-level data to guide future investments in ECE capacity.

5. Expand Aftercare and Scheduling Flexibility

Families' work and education schedules often do not align with program hours, and uncertainty about aftercare makes public Pre-K impractical for some families. We recommend:

- Expanding reliable and affordable before- and after-care linked to publicly funded Pre-K.
- Supporting extended-day, extended-year, and flexible-hour care models across ECE settings.
- Encouraging partnerships between schools and community-based providers to provide seamless full-day coverage.
- Clearly communicating program hours, aftercare availability, and related costs before families make enrollment decisions.

6. Improve Geographic Access and Address Transportation Barriers

Families report that program location and transportation affect whether they can use available ECE options. Rather than prescribing a single transportation model, the city should incorporate these barriers into planning and develop targeted responses. We recommend:

- Using neighborhood-level population, demand, enrollment, and transit information to guide where ECE seats and family support services are expanded.
- Assessing transportation barriers during enrollment and referral processes and connecting families to existing transportation resources when available.
- Exploring targeted transportation partnerships or pilot strategies for families who otherwise lack a feasible way to reach an available program.

7. Create a Multilingual, Trusted, and User-Friendly ECE Navigation System

Families often know that resources exist but struggle to identify appropriate options, understand eligibility, complete applications, or obtain reliable information. In particular, those who do not speak English at home and/or immigrant families reported information and navigation barriers. Families also emphasize the importance of receiving information through trusted people and organizations. We recommend:

- Developing a centralized, user-friendly source of current information on program availability, eligibility, cost, hours, location, language access, aftercare, and inclusive services.
- Pairing online information with individualized enrollment and navigation assistance through multilingual staff, family service coordinators, and trusted community partners.
- Providing clear, step-by-step guidance for enrolling in public Pre-K, Head Start, and other private ECE programs.
- Partnering with schools, pediatricians, libraries, faith organizations, employers, public agencies, and community organizations to share consistent information.
- Using multiple communication channels, including text messages, email, social media, community events, Spanish-language media, and K-12 school communications.
- Expanding peer ambassador and parent network initiatives, particularly in communities that have been less effectively reached by existing outreach.

8. Strengthen Inclusive Support for Children with Special Needs

Families of children with special needs face delays, complicated processes, and barriers to finding inclusive programs. We recommend:

- Streamlining evaluation, eligibility, and referral processes for Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).
- Expanding family service coordinators who can support families across evaluations, placement, and transitions.
- Increasing the availability of inclusive programs across public schools and community-based ECE settings.
- Providing ongoing professional development, consultation, and resources to help ECE providers implement inclusive practices.
- Monitoring wait times and access to inclusive programs to identify and address disparities.

9. Invest in Workforce Stability and Fostering Strong Relationships

Families link program quality to stable, well-supported educators and nurturing relationships. Educators who are also parents have difficulty supporting other families' children while struggling to secure reliable care for their own children. We recommend:

- Improving compensation, benefits, working conditions, and retention incentives for the ECE workforce.
- Expanding coaching, mental health support, and opportunities for ECE educators' professional growth.
- Strengthening culturally and linguistically responsive family engagement and supporting bilingual staffing.
- Building organizational environments that promote the well-being of both children and adults.
- Exploring targeted child care assistance for ECE and K-12 educators and staff, which may include reserved slots, priority enrollment, reduced fees, subsidies, or employer-supported benefits.

10. Expand Integrated Data Infrastructure and Establish a Unique Child Identifier

Through the Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC), Baltimore City has an existing infrastructure for linking data across publicly funded programs and examining children's experiences and outcomes over time. As the city expands its mixed-delivery ECE system, this infrastructure should be strengthened to include participating community-based providers and to support a more complete understanding of children's experiences from birth through entry into the K–12 system. A consistent unique child identifier would further improve the city's ability to examine access, continuity, transitions, and outcomes across settings. We recommend:

- Expanding the existing data-linking infrastructure to incorporate data from all publicly funded ECE programs, including participating community-based providers within the mixed-delivery system.
- Advocating, in coordination with state partners, for a consistent unique child identifier that is assigned as early as possible and follows children across ECE programs and into the K–12 system.
- Expanding data-sharing agreements, common definitions, and governance procedures across Baltimore City Public Schools, public agencies, Head Start, Judy Centers, and participating community-based providers.
- Supporting community-based providers in developing the data systems, reporting capacity, and technical infrastructure needed to participate in integrated data efforts without creating undue administrative burden.
- Using linked data to examine applications, waitlists, enrollment, attendance, program transitions, continuity of services, and school-readiness outcomes across programs and over time.
- Regularly reviewing and reporting disaggregated data to identify inequities by neighborhood, income, race and ethnicity, language, disability, program setting, and other relevant characteristics.
- Establishing strong privacy, security, consent, governance, and data-access protections so that linked information is used only for clearly defined public purposes.

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