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## **Excellence at an early age**

**Our view: Md. ranks in the top 10 for quality pre-K, but too many kids are still left out**

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Here's another accolade to add to Maryland's No. 1 ranking among the nation's public schools: This week, a respected national survey of publicly funded preschool programs named Maryland one of the top 10 states for quality early child care and pre-kindergarten programs.

The report, by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, was based on data from all 50 states as well as information provided by Head Start, the U.S. Census and other sources. Although researchers found that efforts to improve early childhood education nationally had slowed as a result of the recession, state funding and public support for pre-K remained strong in Maryland, and the percentage of children who enter kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed in school continues to increase.

One heartening bit of news is that much of the gain in school readiness occurred among low-income and minority students from families earning less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level. These are the children who are most at risk of school failure, and studies have shown that quality early care and pre-K attendance can drastically increase their chances of success.

Yet currently, fewer than half of the state's 61,000 4-year-olds who will go on to enter public school kindergartens are eligible for free public pre-K, and about a third of those who are enrolled could lose their eligibility if local school systems run out of money, forcing them to cut class sizes or reduce the number of locations where programs are offered.

Last year, the Maryland General Assembly passed a bill directing the state education department to plan a gradual expansion of pre-K eligibility that would eventually include every child in the state. The first stage would have seen the eligibility limit on family income rise from 185 percent to 300 percent of the federal poverty line,

increasing the programs' current \$101 million cost by \$19 million. But momentum for the effort stalled this year in the face of pressure to close a \$2 billion state budget gap. Still, lawmakers did acknowledge the issue's importance by directing state education officials to apply for a grant from the Obama administration's \$10 billion Early Learning Challenge Fund.

Officials cannot, however, afford to lose sight of the importance of Maryland's hard-won gains in early education, or the urgent public interest in expanding access to quality pre-K. It's a fact that low-income, minority and non-native-English-speaking students who attend pre-K are significantly more ready for school than their counterparts who do not, and pre-K attendance also significantly reduces the readiness gap between these students and their more affluent peers.

Moreover, the state's relatively modest investment in expanded pre-K is a drop in the bucket compared with the enormous social costs of school failure. Kids who arrive at school unprepared have trouble throughout their academic careers, and the state pays dearly for those who drop out — in the form of higher incarceration and Medicaid costs, and in lost tax revenues.

Surely that money would be better spent on quality early education. That's why lawmakers should make universal access to pre-K programs a priority and encourage every child to strive for excellence early and often.

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