

Maryland Education Challenges and Solutions

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Summary

The [Blueprint Implementation Plans](#) created in March 2023 by governing bodies of the Maryland education system, including the Maryland Department of Education and Howard County Public Schools, focused on five pillars. These included early childhood education, high-quality and diverse teachers and leaders, college and career readiness, more resources to ensure all students are successful, and governance and accountability. They identified challenges facing the Maryland Education system and included their plans to mitigate them. Four challenges that stood out in these reports that Maryland needs to focus on were expanding access to preschool, hiring teachers in critical shortage areas such as special education and foreign language, and removing barriers for underserved populations.

Expanding Access to Preschool

Access to preschool education is a critical issue that affects children's development and future academic success. Several challenges contribute to the limited access to preschool, and addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach. Challenges that limit preschool access include affordability, availability, limited spaces, quality disparities, and barriers to students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Affordability

Preschool can be expensive, making it unaffordable for many families. This disproportionately affects low-income families. Possible solutions include government subsidies, public funding, and non-profit organizations. Governments can provide financial assistance or [subsidies](#) to families, particularly those with low incomes, to make preschool more affordable. Increased public funding for preschool programs can help reduce costs and make them more accessible to a wider range of families. on-profit organizations and community-based initiatives can establish affordable or free preschool options for disadvantaged communities.

Availability

Insufficient availability of preschool programs, particularly in rural or low-income areas, limits access. Solutions may include expansion of public preschool, partnerships, and mobile preschools. Governments can invest in expanding public preschool programs and establishing new facilities in areas where there is a shortage of options. Collaborative partnerships between public schools, community organizations, and private entities can help create additional preschool spaces and reach underserved communities. [Mobile preschools](#) can be utilized to reach remote or underserved areas, providing early education opportunities to children who lack access to a physical preschool facility.

Limited Space

In many areas, there is a high demand for limited preschool spaces, leading to long waitlists. To address this issue governments can invest in expanding the capacity of existing preschools or funding the establishment of new ones to accommodate more children. They could also introduce flexible scheduling options, such as half-day or extended-day programs, which can help optimize the use of limited spaces and accommodate more children. [Collaboration between public and private sectors](#) can leverage existing resources and facilities to create additional preschool spaces.

Quality Disparities

Disparities in the quality of preschool programs exist, with some lacking appropriate curriculum, qualified teachers, and adequate resources. Solutions include [quality standards](#), professional development, and parental education. Implementing and enforcing quality standards for preschool programs can ensure that all children have access to high-quality education. Providing ongoing professional development and training opportunities for preschool teachers can improve the overall quality of early childhood education. Educating parents about the importance of quality early childhood education can help them make informed choices and advocate for better preschool options in their communities.

Language and Cultural Barriers

Children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds may face barriers to accessing preschool. Solutions include [bilingual](#) and [culturally sensitive programs](#) and interpreter services. Establishing preschool programs that cater to diverse populations, including bilingual programs and culturally sensitive curriculum, can promote inclusivity and provide equitable access. Providing interpreter services or bilingual staff can help overcome language barriers and facilitate communication with families who have limited English proficiency. Addressing these issues requires a collaborative effort involving governments, educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and communities. By investing in early childhood education and implementing effective strategies, society can work towards ensuring that all children have equitable access to high-quality preschool education.

Hiring Teachers in Critical Shortage Areas

Certain subject areas prove to be more difficult to hire qualified teachers in. [Critical shortage areas include](#) art, career and research development, computer science, dance, engineering and technology education, english, english for speakers of other languages, family and consumer services, health, mathematics, occupational therapist, physical education, physical therapist, reading specialist, school library media, school psychologist, science, special education, speech language pathologist, teachers for the blind and visually impaired, teachers for the deaf and hard of hearing, and world languages. The Maryland State Board of Education responded to teacher shortages by [waiving certification requirements](#). Responses included long-term substitutes, recently promoted teachers, and paraprofessionals acting in the place of

full-fledged teachers. This was more of a short term fix than a long-term solution. Possible solutions to this include, boosting teacher's pay, partnering with higher education institutions, and subsidizing educator training and education.

Boosting Pay

Raising salaries for teachers is perhaps the most basic solution to a lower supply, but may not be enough for this shortage. Currently, Howard County pays the [sixth most](#) highest salary for teachers out of counties in Maryland. [Howard County Public Schools Superintendent reported](#) that even after raising teacher's starting salaries from \$50,000 to \$56,000 and offering high-level benefits, Howard County still has 185 vacancies to fill. Howard County has also held job fairs and asked current teachers to reach out to people they may know. An issue is that multiple counties in Maryland are competing for the same pool of people. This indicates that the shortage is because there are not enough people with the right skillset to fill these positions at all, not because the salary is not good.

Partnering with Higher Education Institutions

Another approach is to partner with higher education institutions to ensure new teachers will come to work for Howard County. This is something [Howard County already does by partnering with the Howard County Education Association \(HCEA\), Bowie State University and Towson University](#). This has been effective both in recruiting teachers but also in diversifying the workforce by removing financial barriers. Since this has been effective already, Howard County could expand these programs even more to stave off future shortages and diversify the workforce even more.

Subsidizing Educator Training and Education

More people would be encouraged to become teachers if the cost of their education was covered. This could include [grants, federal student loan forgiveness, or low-cost teacher preparation programs](#). Schools could also cover the cost of paraeducators to become certified to teach. This would reduce the burden on teachers to pay for their education and worry about paying back student loans. Not only would this encourage people to pursue teaching, but may encourage them to go in some of the more specific critical shortage areas.

Removing Barriers to Underserved Populations

The state and quality of education differs from school to school, and the socioeconomic states of the incorporated neighborhoods plays a large part in the opportunities given and the funding towards the schools, thus influencing the quality of education received. Solutions to reduce barriers for underserved populations to education are free and reduced meals, improving career readiness, addressing mental health issues, and providing behavioral health services.

Free and Reduced Meals

One solution is [providing free and reduced meals](#) to ensure students receive affordable meals that provide nutrition throughout the day. Free and reduced meal programs helped students focus on school and not their next meal, but recently federal legislation that provided free meals to all students expired and Congress ended it. Bringing back this program would be a great first step to reduce barriers, but food and nutrition isn't the only thing kids in less financially privileged groups are missing out on. FARMs didn't entirely encompass the financial needs of students, as it doesn't provide dynamic data nor variation in income. The eligibility data is severely limited, as it is only used to divide students into three categories (not eligible, eligible for free-lunch, eligible for reduced-lunch), and is a measure of a single point at one single moment. Many family incomes can change drastically throughout the school year, and the rigid system isn't able to provide those students with the affordable lunches needed. Students in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty are naturally at a disadvantage, as the neighborhoods have poorer resources and the individual has less resources. Many schools contain these neighborhoods in their area, and have many negative outcomes on students' educational outcomes. Schools near large amounts of poverty have less of a chance to reach high academic achievement levels than those without.

Career Readiness

Many issues are prevalent in students [not being career-ready](#), and only college-ready after graduation, which is a burden to those who are unable or unlikely to attend college. Improving apprenticeship opportunities to ensure that students are career-ready instead of college-ready is a great service to many families who may not have the means nor resources to support children through higher education, and for students who wish to pursue a career straight out of high school either for financial or skill-based reasons. These students will be directly employable after high school, allowing them to contribute more to their family or personal income, and also allowing them to have a viable career despite not attending university.

Mental Health

Mental health is also an issue many students face today, and many aren't able to afford therapy or seek other treatment. According to the [CDC](#). "In 2021, more than 4 in 10 (42%) students felt persistently sad or hopeless and nearly one-third (29%) experienced poor mental health." Poor mental health can affect school and grades as well as increase the risk of self-harm, drug use, and other dangerous behaviors. A study by the [Jed Foundation](#) found that anxiety is a top problem for students and is not being addressed fully in high schools. School is undeniably a large part of a student's life, and also a large portion of their mental burden. With the lack of access for many students, schools should help students by providing better in-school mental health resources, and paying more care to the students' mental health.

Behavioral Health Services

Contributing to the lack of resources for students' mental needs is that there is a lack of providers of behavioral health services. While students need services immediately, partnerships do not yet exist because the first round of grant funding will be provided directly to service providers. This means coordination may be challenging. Local education agencies will not be grantees and therefore not accountable to the CHRC and Consortium. The participation of school-employed staff in technical assistance programs to advance to best practices and positive classrooms. There is a heavy reliance on youth-serving agencies to implement, creating a need to train local hubs to be able to coordinate with youth-serving agencies. According to the ACLU, "21 percent of high schools did not have access to a school counselor." One [solution](#) is to require school systems to provide annual training for staff to recognize mental health and behavioral issues in students, which is included in Maryland's Blueprint Plans.

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