

Racing to the Top: Maryland's Promising Practices in Family Engagement



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Around the Clock: The Power of Anytime Learning

When Maryland applied for the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge in 2011, the state already boasted a robust set of policies and infrastructure to serve young children and their families from birth to age 8. Statewide funding supported such programs as the Judith P. Hoyer Early Care and Education Enhancement Program (Judy Centers), providing evidence-based¹ comprehensive early care and education services for children aged birth through 5 years; the Maryland Family Network, the largest child advocacy organization in Maryland; and early childhood home-visitation initiatives across the state. But Maryland's family engagement providers saw room for improvement even within this impressive array of programs. They wanted to transform parent involvement into "authentic parent engagement"—to move away from providing services and assuming that families would take advantage of them toward partnering with families, being sensitive to their cultural needs, and responding to their opinions.

In order to offer a continuum of parent engagement supports that would reach families in school and in their communities, Maryland's education leaders¹ knew they would need both a coordinated strategic-planning effort and an influx of outside funding. According to Linda Zang, branch chief for Collaboration and Program Improvement in the Division of Early Childhood Development, the Coalition shares an overarching goal: "We want a family, no matter what program they enter, to be treated respectfully, to trust providers to share resources that they need, and to be able to be partners in their child's early education and care."² The almost \$50 million that the state was awarded through the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (see text box, At a Glance: Maryland Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge) gave them the opportunity to make these improvements.

Maryland has used its Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge funding to convene a Family Engagement Coalition consisting of

AT A GLANCE: Maryland Race to the Top— Early Learning Challenge

Year of Award: 2011 (Phase 1)
*Total Race to the Top—Early Learning
Challenge Award:* \$49,999,143
(2011–14)
*State Department of Early Childhood
Budget:* \$133,090,044 (FY 2011)

*Selected Family Engagement
Partners:* Maryland Family
Engagement Coalition, Mid-Atlantic
Equity Consortium, Judy Centers,
Maryland Family Network (Child
Care Resource Center and Family
Support Center Networks), Healthy
Families America, Parents as
Teachers, HIPPIY, Early Head Start,
Head Start, The Policy Equity Group,
local education agencies, Ready at
Five, Maryland State Child Care
Association, Head Start T/TA
Program, Maryland School-Age Child
Care Alliance, Maryland Library
Association, Maryland Parent and
Teacher Association, Maryland
Chapter of the American Academy
of Pediatrics, the Maryland
Department of Human Resources,
Maryland State Department of
Education (Divisions of Early
Childhood Development, Special
Education and Early Intervention,
Library Development and Services,
and Student, Family, and School
Support).

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child care and family support providers from a wide range of sectors and across the state. This diverse body has committed to a series of ambitious and measurable goals for family engagement and is incrementally building the capacity of stakeholders to achieve them. Capacity-building efforts such as training and technical assistance from the Maryland Family Network and the federally supported Maryland Head Start Training and Technical Assistance Program (T/TA) allow the state of Maryland not only to scale up family engagement approaches like Healthy Beginnings and the Strengthening Families Protective Factors, but also to pilot and launch new initiatives. Most promising of all, the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant has enabled Maryland to build the necessary infrastructure to ensure that every family in the state benefits from a sustained, consistent family engagement strategy implemented by well-trained, skilled early childhood providers.



Healthy Beginnings is a set of guidelines and activities for families and early education providers that the Maryland State Department of Education, created in partnership with Johns Hopkins University, Center for Technology in Education.

A UNIFYING FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITION OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The Maryland Family Engagement Coalition is at the heart of the ambitious family engagement proposals outlined in Maryland's Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge. Charged by the governor's State Advisory Council on Early Care and Education with creating a unifying plan to guide family engagement efforts across Maryland, the Coalition developed the *Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework: Maryland's Vision for Engaging Families with Young Children* ("the Framework").³ The Coalition based the Framework on the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework released in 2011. However, it strategically adapted Head Start's framework both to reflect Maryland's specific context and to serve as a unifying vision that will enable the state to coordinate its efforts as it begins to implement the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant.⁴

Maryland's Definition of Family Engagement⁵

The characteristics that define family engagement according to the Maryland Family Engagement Coalition include:

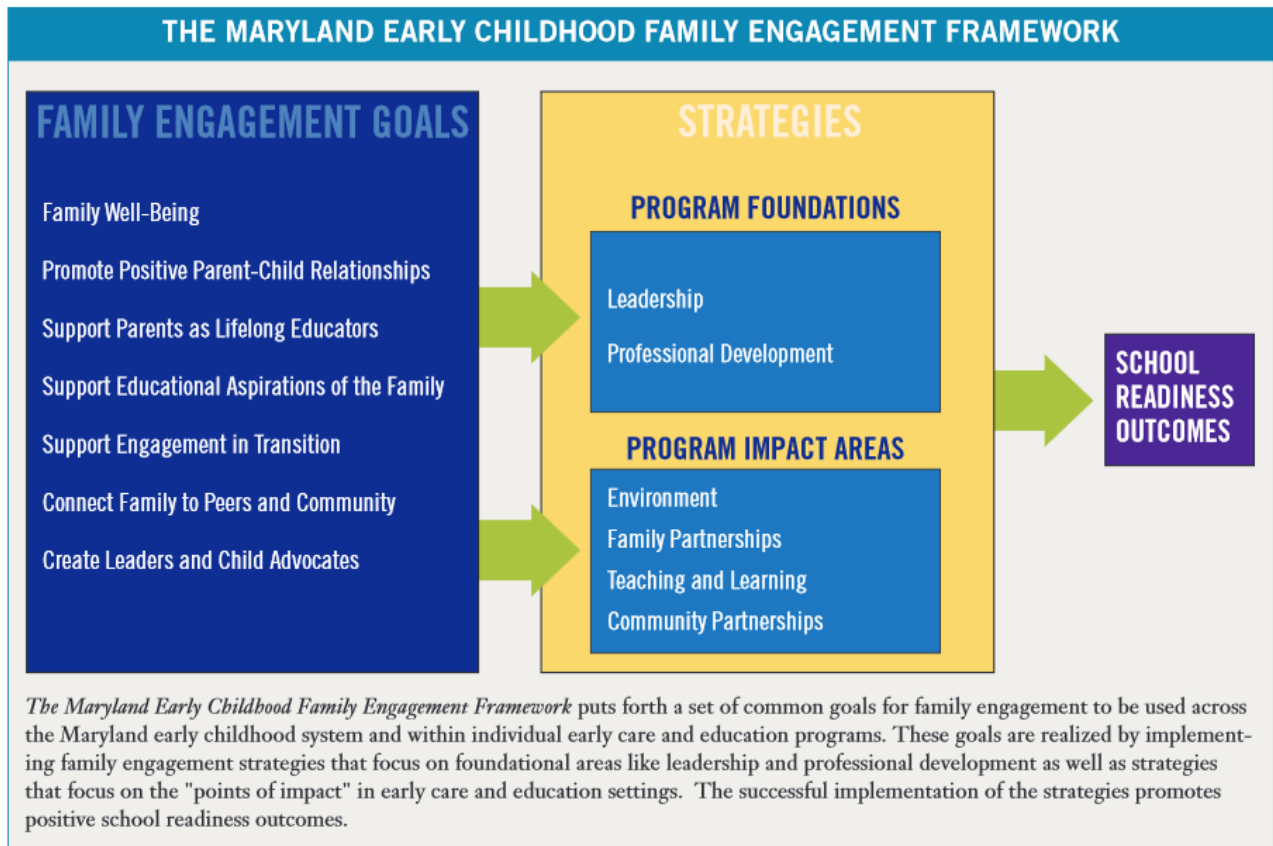
- Family engagement is a **shared responsibility** of families, schools, and communities for student learning and achievement.
- It is **continuous** from birth into the school-age years.
- It occurs across the **various early care and learning settings** where children are.
- Family engagement means **building relationships** with families that support family well-being, strong parent–child relationships, and the ongoing learning and development of parents and children alike.
- It reflects **culturally competent and universal design** approaches, encompassing the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and activities of all families as well as early care settings that support all children's positive development.
- Family engagement happens in the **home, early childhood settings, school, and community**.
- Sustainable family engagement operates with **adequate resources**, including public–private partnerships, to ensure meaningful and effective strategies that have the power to impact student learning and achievement.

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Through its Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant, Maryland is embedding a new family engagement definition across the entire state (see text box, Maryland's Definition of Family Engagement). This challenging work will take time to fully implement, and it has only been two years since Maryland embarked on this journey. However, the definition serves as the foundation of all the changes to family engagement policy and infrastructure proposed in Maryland's Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge application. Therefore, in the future, much of Maryland's Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge work will involve integrating this definition into statewide policy and infrastructure.

Maryland's Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge application commits the Coalition to embedding the statewide definition of family engagement in workforce regulations, federal grants, standards, and statewide accountability systems.⁶ Furthermore, state-funded early childhood providers across Maryland will be encouraged to use the Framework to ensure that their family engagement strategies are consistent with the state's new definition of family engagement (see graphic, The Maryland Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework). In some cases, this adaptive work may involve providers reenvisioning their mission, goals, and strategies in order to more closely align their work with the state's new family engagement definition, and with one another.⁷ For example, Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge funding has supported the Maryland Library Association in its efforts to fundamentally redefine how librarians reach out to families and help them support their children (see Maryland Library Partnership at the end of this profile).



In addition to offering a common definition for talking about family engagement and aligning strategies across and between statewide agencies and providers, the Framework also serves as the starting point for developing policies to evaluate the effectiveness of family engagement interventions. According to Maryland's Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge application, the Coalition will be responsible for creating “outcome measures” for each outcome in the Framework.⁸ Eventually, the goal will be to create a “process by which Maryland can gauge the success of its family engagement practices.”⁹



Bringing Local Partners Together: Allegany School Readiness Fair

BUILDING A COMPREHENSIVE AND COHESIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

Given the tremendous coordination required in order to align the family engagement work of countless government agencies, schools, and individual providers across an entire state, it is no surprise that Maryland has made developing a more robust statewide infrastructure to support family engagement a top priority for its Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge work. Components of Maryland's growing statewide family engagement infrastructure include oversight and governance; cross-agency collaboration; mechanisms to facilitate feedback and two-way communication; oversight and accountability structures; and opportunities for technical assistance and capacity building.

Oversight and governance

The governor's State Advisory Council on Early Care and Education oversees the work of building infrastructure for the early learning challenge. In this capacity, the agency oversees the Maryland Family Engagement Coalition. However, it has also embedded family engagement into its own mission by making one of its three goals promoting the access to the resources “parents need in order to be their child's first teacher.”¹⁰ The Coalition also represents an influential oversight body, because it includes the leadership of key state agencies, including leaders from local education agencies, libraries,

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nonprofits, Head Start, Early Head Start, Maryland PTA, family and early childhood policy experts, special education and early intervention, experts in cultural significance, and other providers of direct services to children and families.

Cross-agency collaboration

If the State Advisory Council is at the top of Maryland's budding statewide family engagement infrastructure, the Maryland Family Engagement Coalition is at the center. As the architect of the Framework, the Coalition is now responsible for ensuring that sufficiently robust infrastructure exists to allow all providers statewide to align their work with the Framework's vision and goals. To this end, the Coalition convenes agencies and providers, bringing them together to ensure that they communicate with each other to align their own work. Cross-agency collaboration in support of family engagement is not new or novel in Maryland. Prior to the state's Early Learning Challenge Award, the Maryland Division of Special Education/Early Intervention Services section already regularly connected Preschool Partners, Partners for Success, Maryland School for the Deaf, Maryland School for the Blind, Parents Place, and Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.¹¹

The implementation of the Head Start Framework served as an opportunity for the state to develop guidance that would help all of these diverse programs improve while remaining flexible enough to meet their needs. As Maryland Family Network executive director Margaret Williams notes, "We serve a broad array of people, and we needed to be sure that [our family engagement framework] served child care providers of all kinds, from home visiting programs, to family support, to advocates of children with special needs."¹² The Coalition's work ensures that cross-agency collaboration results in innovative new family engagement programs serving Maryland's neediest children. (For one example of this promising collaboration, see text box, Maryland Library Partnership.)

Feedback and two-way communication

Convening so many agencies across the state and aligning their work requires the Coalition to develop and refine systems to encourage democratic participation. With this strategy in mind, the Coalition is prioritizing effective, two-way communication with families as a key component of its work. For example, the Maryland Family Network is helping to facilitate a series of community conversations, called Parent Cafés, across the state.¹³ In partnership with other family service organizations, including Judy Centers and child care

The Maryland EXCELS QRIS

The Maryland EXCELS Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) assesses participating statewide child care agencies according to a number of different content areas, assigns them a score from level 1 to level 5, and disseminates the results to stakeholders.

Content areas fall into one of five broad categories: Licensing and Compliance, Staffing and Professional Development, Rating Scale and Accreditation, Developmentally Appropriate Learning and Practices, and Administrative Policies and Practices. Within these content areas, EXCELS assesses programs on family engagement using a number of criteria. The state's Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge application outlines the draft family engagement indicators as follows:

Levels 2–3:¹ Families are provided with opportunities to be involved in the program in at least two ways.

Level 4: Families are provided with at least four ways to be involved in the program, including conferences, activities, fundraising, decision making, parent newsletters, or parent surveys. Program requests a copy of a child's IFSP/IEP (if applicable) and works with early intervention or special education service providers to support child and family outcomes.

Level 5: Families are provided with at least five ways to be involved in the program, including conferences, activities, fundraising, decision making, parent newsletters, or parent surveys. Program requests a copy of a child's IFSP/IEP (if applicable) and works with early intervention or special education service providers to support child and family outcomes.¹

resource centers, the Maryland Family Network's Parent Cafés enable agencies to engage families using the Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors curriculum. According to Margaret Williams, initial feedback from families has been overwhelmingly positive.¹⁴ That said, Williams points to a number of challenges of implementing this model with fidelity across an entire state, including exercising quality control over all facilitators and ensuring that every Café has strong parent attendance.¹⁵

Oversight and accountability

Oversight and accountability comprise key components of the statewide family engagement infrastructure. One of the pillars of Maryland's Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge application is the commitment to develop the EXCELS Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), a voluntary program that rates education providers across the state. As of January 2014, the system had completed its field-testing phase.¹⁶ Given the priority that Maryland places on effective family engagement, it is no surprise that the EXCELS QRIS includes family engagement benchmarks that are applicable to child care homes, child care centers, and school-age programs (see text box, The Maryland EXCELS QRIS).

Mobilizing parents to demand quality and signal their support for this accountability system has been a focus of Margaret Williams's work at the Maryland Family Network. As a co-chair of the Coalition, Williams has focused on developing an organized public relations campaign to encourage parents to get involved in the EXCELS QRIS "on both the supply and demand side."¹⁷ By motivating parents to talk about what quality means to them, and signaling that parents will support providers that commit to continuous improvement through the EXCELS QRIS, Williams and her team are promoting a more purposeful, comprehensive definition of accountability for family engagement across the state.¹⁸

Maryland Library Partnership

An innovative collaboration between the Maryland Association of Public Library Administrators and the Maryland State Department of Education, the Library Partnership adopts a client-centered approach that puts disadvantaged families and children first. Library partners promote a customer-friendly atmosphere conducive to learning, and target their services to individual families' learning interests and needs. Activities include Library Cafés, which involve carefully facilitated training for families, along with relationship- and community-building exercises. The libraries also partner with other community-based organizations, including Head Start, GED programs, and addiction recovery programs.

In future years, a \$500,000 grant will support an evaluation of the Library Partnership's curriculum. For now, library administrators are proud of their preliminary success: increased parent attendance at libraries and highly positive feedback about more welcoming climates and useful resources.¹⁹ Furthermore, librarians across the state have embraced the Library Partnership despite the tremendous work it requires.²⁰ With engaged librarians committed to offering families warm and welcoming learning environments outside of school, Maryland's Library Partnership promises to serve as a model for innovative family engagement.



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Technical assistance and capacity building

Because members of the Coalition understand that accountability must be paired with meaningful capacity building, they also give providers the technical assistance they need to make adaptations to their work, including guidance, suggestions for strategies, and training directly to educators.²¹ State partners such as the Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Maryland Association of Public Library Administrators, and Maryland Family Network, are statewide entities with expertise in training providers to work with parents using research-based approaches. According to Paul Pittman, executive director of Head Start of Washington County, and a Coalition member, the federal Head Start program was a natural fit to assist Maryland with its family engagement capacity building, because it has experience in providing technical assistance and is grounded in collaboration with families.²² Furthermore, in some circumstances, the Head Start Training and Technical Assistance Programs offer training and technical assistance to other early childhood programs throughout Maryland.

CONCLUSION

Maryland is developing a solid infrastructure for supporting providers, holding them accountable for quality work, and facilitating communication and knowledge sharing among them. It has sometimes been a challenge to convince stakeholders that this ambitious realignment is worth the energy and cost. However, given the inclusive nature of the Maryland Family Engagement Coalition, stakeholders have felt supported and motivated by their peers to proceed with these adaptive changes. Linda Zang emphasizes explicitly that the Coalition's role is to support family engagement providers statewide: "Our job is to make sure that all providers are able to work with all kinds of families."⁴⁶ In service of this goal, Zang and her team focus on developing orientation sessions, responsive professional development, and other forms of technical assistance across the state. Combined with a quality rating system, even more high-quality providers will have the opportunity to scale, giving more children and families in Maryland access to their work.

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This resource is part of the [September FINE Newsletter](#). The FINE Newsletter shares the newest and best family engagement research and resources from Harvard Family Research Project and other field leaders. To access the archives of past issues, please visit www.hfrp.org/FINENewsletter.

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¹ For an evaluation of the Judy Centers program, see: MGT of America (2004). *Judith P. Hoyer early care and education enhancement program evaluation: Final results brief*. Retrieved from http://www.msde.maryland.gov/NR/rdonlyres/B595A4C8-DF6E-4DE8-AC0C-F2450A8CB008/19478/1891_Report_Brief_BwU3_022004.pdf

² L. Zang, personal communication, January, 27, 2014.

³ State of Maryland (2011). *Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge: Application for initial funding*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/applications/maryland.pdf>, p. 186.

⁴ Maryland Family Engagement Coalition (2013). *The early childhood family engagement framework: Maryland's vision for engaging families with young children*, p. 2.

⁵ Maryland Family Engagement Coalition, 2013, p. 3.

⁶ State of Maryland, 2011, pp. 186–187.

⁷ Maryland Family Engagement Coalition, 2013, p. 3.

⁸ State of Maryland, 2011, p. 187.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ State of Maryland, 2011, p. 185.

¹¹ State of Maryland, 2011, pp. 40–41.

¹² M. Williams, personal communication, January 22, 2014.

¹³ Office of the Governor, State of Maryland (2012). *Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge: Annual performance report*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/annual-performance-reports/mdfinalapr.pdf>, p. 32.

¹⁴ M. Williams, personal communication, January 22, 2014.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Office of the Governor, 2012, p. 12.

¹⁷ M. Williams, personal communication, January 22, 2014.

¹⁸ Ibid.

²³ P. Isett & K. Reif, personal communication, January 17, 2014.

²⁴ Ibid.

²¹ Office of the Governor, 2012, p. 32.

²⁰ Criteria for rating at Level 1 are not included. According to the Maryland EXCELS website, “due to Maryland’s stringent licensing and registration requirements, all licensed and registered child care programs/providers are considered Check Level 1 upon acceptance into EXCELS.” Maryland EXCELS (2014). *Basics*. Retrieved from <http://www.marylandexcels.org/4562>

²¹ State of Maryland, 2011, pp. 38–39.

²² P. Pittman, personal communication, January 24, 2014.

²⁵ L. Zang, personal communication, January 27, 2014.