



GRANT INFORMATION GUIDE

Local Early Childhood Advisory Council (LECAC) System Improvement Grant

Maryland State Department of Education

200 West Baltimore Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Deadline

August 14, 2026
No later than 5:00 p.m. EDT

MARYLAND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Table of Contents

Program Description	3
Use of Funds	5
Program Requirements.....	6
Application Requirements	8
Budget and Budget Narrative	12
Appendices.....	13
Review Process	14
Reporting Requirements	17
Grant Application Timeline	18
Non-Discrimination Statement	19
The General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) Section 427	20
Customer Service Support Sessions.....	21

Program Description

The Local Early Childhood Advisory Council (Local ECAC) Systems Improvement Grant Fiscal Year 2027 is a grant administered by the Division of Early Childhood at the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). Based on fund availability, the Division may provide funding for the 24 local early childhood advisory councils throughout Maryland.

The Local ECAC Systems Improvement Grant serves to support advisory councils in the periodic assessment of local early childhood needs, identifying the opportunities and barriers to collaboration and coordination of early childhood education (ECE) programs, supporting the implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, and assessing the capacity and effectiveness of local programs for developing early childhood educators. This program provides the resources for local early childhood advisory councils to compile data and conduct activities necessary to facilitate the State ECAC in achieving its goals and to support related local goals.

The State ECAC is working to advance the following strategic priorities:

1. Expand Access to Early Care and Education
2. Strengthen Quality to Improve Outcomes
3. Build Infrastructure

In support of the State ECAC, Local ECACs will be asked to contribute to local information and data gathering aligned with strategic priority 1, Expand Access, in Fiscal Year 2027.

The Local ECAC Systems Improvement Grant supports advisory councils in engaging in ongoing, locally grounded needs sensing to better understand the evolving landscape of early childhood systems in counties across Maryland. This includes identifying community-specific priorities, surfacing emerging and underrecognized challenges, and examining barriers to access, workforce stability, child care availability, and family services. Councils are encouraged to assess gaps in areas such as prekindergarten (Pre-K) enrollment, workforce capacity, and service coordination, with particular attention to issues that may not be fully captured through existing data systems.

AUTHORIZATION

[Local Early Childhood Advisory Council Bylaws](#)

GRANT OVERVIEW

Name of Grant Program

Local Early Childhood Advisory Council (Local ECAC) Systems Improvement Grant

Purpose

Local ECACs in Maryland play a vital role in strengthening early childhood systems at the county level. They ensure local strategies are responsive to community needs while aligning with state and federal early childhood priorities and also ensuring local priorities and voices are shared with the State ECAC. The purposes include:

- Conduct or Collect and Summarize Local Needs Assessments: Periodically assess the quality and availability of early childhood education and development programs and services in the community.

- Use evidence to inform collaboration: Identify barriers to collaboration, evaluate the effectiveness of local early childhood programs, and implement strategies to improve early childhood services and outcomes in their county.
- Develop Local Action Plans: Create and implement plans to increase participation in early childhood programs including Prekindergarten (Pre-K), Patty Center Family Support Programs, and Judy Center Early Learning Hubs, ensure all families are connected and aware of ECE resources, elevate the quality of existing programs, and coordinate with other initiatives.
- Coordinate Local Early Childhood Initiatives including the Blueprint for Maryland's Future: Serve as a hub for collaboration among child-serving agencies, including education, health, and social services.
- Report to the State ECAC: Share local priorities and feedback, data, progress, challenges, and outcomes with the State ECAC.
- Support evidence-based quality and improved child outcomes: Support (1) Local programs and providers to participate in Maryland EXCELS including coordination with CLASS and LENA Grow; (2) Local early educators to obtain qualifications necessary to meet assistant teacher and teacher qualifications for child care and Pre-K, including science of reading and mathematics training, and supporting improved practice and teacher-child interactions and responsiveness.

Dissemination

This Grant Information Guide (GIG) was released on June 22, 2026.

Deadline

The proposals are due no later than 5:00 p.m. on August 14, 2026.

Grant Period

October 1, 2026 – June 30, 2027

Funding Amount Available

A total of \$590,448 is available. Awards will be made in the amount between \$24,602 - \$34,732 per council to support needs assessments, planning, coordination, and implementation activities. The estimated average grant amount will be dependent on the number of eligible applications received.

The amount of total funds available is contingent upon the continuing availability of federal funding.

Estimated Number of Grants

Seventeen (17) – Twenty-four (24)

Eligibility

This funding opportunity is designed for the identified fiscal agent of each Local ECAC in the State of Maryland, as verified by the MSDE program manager.

Submission Instructions

Complete the grant applications form and save it as a PDF, including all appendices. All items must be submitted by 5:00 p.m. on August 14, 2026, via email to ecac.msde@maryland.gov.

Use of Funds

The following are examples of approved uses for the grant funds in accordance with the purpose of the grant. Other costs not listed here may be presented to the grant manager for determination of allowable expenditures. Funds should first be used to address the purpose of the Local ECAC (see pages 3-4) and then may be used for other allowable items.

Funds may be used for:

- Costs incurred for local needs assessment.
- Costs incurred for participating in the statewide needs assessment.
- Increasing the capacity of the Local ECAC to host evidence-based professional development training that follows MSDE's Training Approval Process and is connected to local EXCELS ratings and improvement plans and build membership.
- Materials and supplies (i.e., instructional materials, books, related supplies for family involvement or staff involvement).
- Costs connected to participation in evidence-based Professional Learning or training and coaching that follows MSDE's Training Approval process, such as CLASS training. This includes:
 - Registration fees to attend evidence-based professional development training.
 - Travel reimbursement and stipends to attend evidence-based professional development.
 - Substitute wages as needed to allow teachers to attend evidence-based professional development.
- Contracts with trained facilitators.
- Indirect costs (may not exceed 15% of the total fund request).
- Personnel costs, including payroll and salaries or similar compensation for an employee (including all associated costs).

Funds may not be used for:

- Supplanting existing program funds.
- Capital improvements.
- Purchase of gift cards.
- Purchase of office furniture and equipment.
- Cost(s) incurred prior to the approval of the grant.
- Purchase of food.

Coordination with Blueprint Funds

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future (Blueprint) seeks to significantly increase investment in high-quality early childhood education so that all children can begin kindergarten, ready to succeed. The Local ECAC early care and education (ECE) Systems Improvement grant supports the Blueprint's strategy toward substantially increasing the availability of high-quality ECE opportunities, the number of early childhood educators entering and remaining in the field, and the school readiness of Maryland's children. The FY 2027 Local ECAC Grant specifically focuses on Blueprint Pillar 1 by directing Local ECACs to conduct targeted needs assessment to contribute to the State ECAC's understanding whether current publicly funded Pre-K availability and enrollment align with local eligibility and need.

Program Requirements

REQUIRED ACTIVITIES

Local ECACs will be required to complete two core activities in FY 2027:

1. Core Activity 1: Assess County Early Care and Education (ECE) Supply and Enrollment
2. Core Activity 2: Gap Analysis

If Local ECACs are able to complete both required core activities within their available grant funding, they will be directed to complete an analysis of both topics under Core Activity 2 before expending funds on additional optional activities that meet the allowable use of funds outlined on page 5.

Core Activity 1: Assess County ECE Supply and Enrollment

MSDE will provide each Local ECAC with a LECAC Toolkit. The toolkit will include a **data snapshot of ECE supply and participation in their county**, along with resources to facilitate focus groups and capture local insights. Each Local ECAC will determine how to review this snapshot. Local ECACs are encouraged to engage community partners in this review to ensure that key interest holders are aligned on the current landscape of early childhood care availability and participation in the jurisdiction. During this meeting, Local ECACs should be prepared to document:

- How they approached the discussion;
- Who was involved and why;
- What insights emerged; and
- How these insights will be used to inform local action in an Action Plan.

These questions will help the Local ECAC prepare the Local ECAC Action Plan final grant summary. A template for the Action Plan will be included in the Local ECAC Toolkit.

Core Activity 2: Gap Analysis

Each county will conduct a structured, low-burden local scan to identify potential gaps in **either infant and toddler care supply OR public Pre-K enrollment and participation**. This scan should draw on existing local knowledge, partner input, and readily available information, and is intended to surface patterns, disparities, and questions rather than serve as a formal data analysis.

Suggested approaches, including facilitation guidance and templates, will be provided in the forthcoming LECAC Toolkit. Through this process, counties will identify and reflect on:

- **Geographic gaps** in infant and toddler care supply or Pre-K enrollment relative to eligible child populations
- **Population gaps**, including priority populations (e.g., children with disabilities, families experiencing housing instability, rural or isolated communities)
- **Age-related patterns** in access or participation, where applicable, across mixed-delivery systems
- **System navigation gaps**, including points where families may disengage across awareness, application, enrollment, or retention. This includes assessing local awareness of Maryland's mixed-delivery system, specifically, whether families understand the availability of both school-based and community-based Pre-K options.

Using the LECAC Toolkit, counties will synthesize findings into:

- **2-3 priority enrollment gaps** most relevant in their local context

- **Initial reflections on potential drivers** of these gaps (e.g., supply constraints, transportation barriers, outreach limitations, eligibility complexity, or family preferences)
- **Key questions for further exploration** to better understand or validate observed patterns

Note: If grant funding allows your Local ECAC to complete both gap analyses, you will be required to complete both before allocating funding to additional optional activities that are aligned with MSDE's current efforts to improve quality of care.

Note: If the Local ECAC completed a gap analysis, supply/demand analysis, or other needs assessment on or after January 1, 2025, this can be submitted in lieu of Core Activities 1 and 2 for review by MSDE. If the report meets MSDE's requirements, Core Activities 1 and 2 can be waived and the Local ECAC can use funding for Optional Activities as described below.

Optional Activities

If grant funding remains after completing both gap analysis, Local ECACs may use funding for additional activities that align with MSDE's efforts to improve quality of care or are MSDE approved Professional Learning. These include, but are not limited to:

- CLASS tool training
- Expanding the use of High Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM)
- Training on the Science of Reading or Early Math
- Infant Early Mental Health to support children's social/emotional and behaviors that challenge adults
- ASQ-3 training
- Results Based Accountability training

Application Requirements

PROPOSAL COVER PAGE

The proposal must include a completed Proposal Cover Page provided in the application for participation. The cover page should not contain any graphics or additional information and must be signed by the Superintendent of Schools/ Head of Grantee Agency. The subsequent information must be clearly stated in the following order:

- Name of applicant/Jurisdiction
- Name of contact person
- Address of contact person
- Telephone and email address of contact person
- Project Partners
- Amount requested

PROJECT NARRATIVE

The project narrative consists of the following sections:

- Project Abstract
- Activities, Strategies, and Timelines
- Interest Holder Engagement Plan
- Management Plan
- Budget and Budget Narrative
- Evaluation and Dissemination

PROJECT ABSTRACT

The project statement should briefly describe the project's outcome(s) and strategies (i.e., what the project will do and how it will do it.) Do not exceed the 100-word limit. This statement may be used in press releases, board exhibits, MSDE reports, etc.

CORE ACTIVITIES: STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

Strategies: Strategies are broad approaches (methods, procedures, techniques) employed to reach milestones, realize outcomes, and ultimately accomplish goals. Include a justification of why specific strategies were chosen and how they will help in accomplishing the core activities. Examples of strategies include hosting listening sessions, conducting data analysis, or leading expert interviews. The justification should cite research to support the strategies.

Timeline: Ongoing evaluation is essential to the management of a project. Since goals and outcomes are not evaluated until the end of the year, milestones must be established to measure progress during the year. Milestones should be evaluated during the year, either quarterly or semiannually.

Example: Core Activity 1: Review County Supply and Enrollment Data

Strategy:	The Local ECAC will convene a 90-minute meeting of key interest holders (identified later in this application) to review the data snapshot provided by MSDE. The goal of the meeting will be to: • Align understanding of the local landscape amongst interest holders. • Begin to explore drivers of supply and demand misalignment. • Develop an action plan for fully investigating supply and demand in the county. The Local ECAC will prepare a list of questions to guide conversation with interest holders to understand the implementation challenges and successes that lead to an alignment/misalignment of Pre-K and child care supply and demand. Key interest holder 1 will be asked to provide supplemental data and context for the county Pre-K program. The Local ECAC will use the discussion during this meeting to develop an action plan for investigating supply and demand.
Timeline:	August 2026: Meeting Scheduled September 2026: Meeting Held October 2026: Post meeting synthesis and action plan developed November 2026: Action Plan submitted to MSDE

INTEREST HOLDER PLAN

Early childhood systems rely on input from families, providers, educators, child care resource centers (CCRCs), local education agencies (LEAs) and schools, Patty Center Family Support Programs, Judy Center Early Learning Hubs, health services, and community organizations. **MSDE strongly encourages Local ECACs engage their local CCRC.** The interest holder engagement plan should show that you are not diagnosing problems or designing solutions in isolation; voices of those affected (especially families and child care providers) are actively included; and decisions reflect real community needs, not assumptions.

The table below prompts the Local ECAC to identify key interest holders and how they will be engaged in the grant. When identifying these interest holders, consider local context, challenges, and successes to ensure that representative groups are engaged in the grant.

Example: Interest Holder Plan Worksheet

Key Interest Holder Individual or Group	Engagement Approach	Purpose
County Public Schools Early Learning Coordinator	- Invited to meeting for core activity 1 - Engaged in focus group planning for core activity 2	This individual submits the LEA's annual Pre-K Expansion Grant application.
Child Care Resource Center	- Invited to meeting for core activity 1 - Assists in identifying parents for focus groups in core activity 2	This group understands the child care landscape for parents and providers.

MANAGEMENT PLAN

Submit a date-specific management plan with pre-assigned responsibilities.

This should be a chronological list of all the key activities that will take place during the grant period. All proposed grant activities, the steering committee member(s) responsible for ensuring the activities are conducted, and the time frame for which they will occur. Committee meeting dates and purposes should be identified in this section of the application. Applicants should consider all the key tasks or activities that need to be carried out to implement the program successfully, whether each task can realistically begin and end in the proposed time frame, and how long each task will take to complete.

Example: Management Plan Worksheet

Key Activities	Individual Responsible	Time Frame
Core Activity 1: Scheduling Interest Holder Meeting	Kelly Dwyer	August 2026
Core Activity 1: Leading interest Holder Meeting	Elka Forbes	September 2026
Core Activity 2: Focus Groups	Kelly Dwyer	October – December 2026

EVALUATION AND DISSEMINATION

To ensure the success of the project, Grantees are required to submit a quarterly interim progress report that is consistent with the project's goal and objective(s). MSDE will provide a template for this submission. This ongoing plan evaluates milestones and helps project staff make informed decisions about needed changes. The final summary will consider the entire project, from beginning to end of grant period.

Budget and Budget Narrative

The project's budget should detail all related project expenses in a separate itemized budget. It should demonstrate the extent to which the budget is reasonable, cost-effective, and integrates other sources of funding. All costs described in the project narrative should appear in the budget narrative and must have a corresponding entry in the itemized budget for that year. Reviewers should be able to see a clear connection between the project goals and narrative and the management plan and the budget line items.

Begin the budget with a narrative, justifying any line-item expenses that are not obvious from the project's narrative. Explain how the estimated cost of each line item was derived if the rationale is not obvious.

Following the budget narrative, include a line-item description using the format in the example below.

- Group line items according to the following categories: Salaries & Wages, Contracted Services, Supplies & Materials, Other Charges, Equipment, and Transfers.
- Total for each category.
- Each line must be detailed and specific.
- General expenses should be broken down into specific line items. For example, "meeting expenses" can be broken down into room rental, photocopying, and refreshments.
- Clearly show the requested funds and in-kind contributions for each line item. Indicate the source of the in-kind contribution. Both requested and in-kind funds must be reasonable with current market prices.
- Show how the expense was calculated for each line item.
- Reviewers will use this information to determine if the budget is reasonable and cost-effective. There is no page limit for the budget, so be as detailed as possible.

Use the format indicated by the following excerpt from a sample Budget Narrative.

Salaries & Wages (list separately for each position)

Line Item	Calculation	Requested	In-Kind	Total
Project Manager	\$50/hr. x 40 hrs. per week x 52 weeks	\$10,000	\$94,000	\$104,000
Total salaries & wages:		\$10,000	\$94,000	\$104,000

Contract Services

Line Item	Calculation	Requested	In-Kind	Total
Support to convert presentation to virtual platform that includes closed captioning	\$3,000			\$3,000
Total for contract services:				\$3,000

Appendices

The following appendices must be included but not apply to the page limit of the Project Narrative. Include other appendices as necessary.

Appendix A: [A signed recipient assurances page](#)

Appendix B: Local Early Childhood Advisory Council By-Laws and Membership

Appendix C: [A signed C-1-25 MSDE budget form](#)

Appendix D: Evidence of status of a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, if applicable

Appendix E: Resume(s) of Key Personnel

Review Process

The review of proposals will be a three-part process:

1. Written applications will be pre-screened for submission requirements and the incorporation of all required sections. Applications not meeting all pre-screen requirements may be returned to the applicant for revisions.
2. A review committee established by MSDE will evaluate applications using the scoring rubric. The scoring rubric is tailored to the grant program, its intent, and intended impact on the target population.
3. Final approval for the awards will be determined by the review committee.

Review Committee

The committee will be composed of representatives from MSDE Division of Early Childhood. Reviewers will assign numerical scores to each proposal based on the criteria on the scoring rubric. Each application will be reviewed and scored based on all documents submitted. Applications may be returned to the applicant if some or all criteria do not meet the criteria standard.

Local ECAC System Improvement Scoring Rubric

Area	Level 3 Exceeds Criteria	Level 2 Meets Criteria	Level 1 Does Not Meet Criteria
Project Abstract	The project abstract outlines a concise and comprehensive summary of the target population, goals, strategies, and partnerships.	The project abstract addresses the required components.	The project abstract is missing or does not address the required components.
Core Activities: Strategies	The proposal provides several rationales for selecting specific, evidence-based strategies, and precisely how they will be implemented to ensure outcomes are achieved. Multiple broad strategies are identified with detailed and systematic methods, procedures, or techniques for successful implementation.	The proposal provides a clear rationale for selecting a specific strategy and how it will help achieve the outcome. Applicant provides broad strategies and includes methods, procedures, and techniques for implementation.	No rationale for selecting specific strategies and how they will help achieve the outcome. The applicant only states some of the strategies but does not include the necessary methods, procedures, or techniques for implementing them.
Core Activities: Timeline	Milestones for each intended outcome ensure continued monitoring for success and include response to meeting targets.	Milestones are provided for measuring progress of each intended outcome.	Milestones are not provided or do not align to outcomes.
Interest Holder Engagement Plan	All relevant interest holders are listed and their role clearly described. Plan clearly explains why each interest holder is being engaged in the work.	The proposal includes an interest holder engagement plan.	The proposal does not include a coherent plan.

Area	Level 3 Exceeds Criteria	Level 2 Meets Criteria	Level 1 Does Not Meet Criteria
Management Plan	All relevant activities are listed chronologically, indicating a comprehensive management plan throughout the grant period.	The proposal includes a time-specific management plan.	The proposal does not include a coherent plan with chronological dates and actions/strategies.
Budget and Budget Narrative	The budget narrative is detailed and comprehensive of all activities necessary for successful implementation of a proposal. The budget aligns directly with the proposal and does not rely entirely on grant funds for successful implementation. There are no mathematical errors, and all expenses are cost effective and appear to be necessary.	The budget narrative is complete. The budget aligns with the proposal and is free of mathematical errors. Expenses are reasonable and allowable.	Budget does not align with the proposal, includes costs that are not reasonable or allowable, or has several mathematical errors.
Evaluation and Dissemination	The evaluation and dissemination plan includes detailed and comprehensive information on who will prepare the final summary, how the results of the grant analysis will be disseminated, including a plan to present findings with the State ECAC.	The evaluation and dissemination plan is complete.	The evaluation and dissemination plan is incomplete or contradictory to information included elsewhere in the application.

Reporting Requirements

Grantees must comply with the following reporting requirements:

Date	Reporting Requirements for Each Year
Ongoing	Fiscal and program monitoring; all invoices must be accompanied by supporting documentation.
60 days after the completion of Core Activity 1	Action Plan Developed with Key Interest Holders
December 31, 2026	The first interim progress report (C-1-25 C) reflecting the months of October and November is due.
February 28, 2027	The second interim progress report (C-1-25 C) reflecting the months of December and January is due.
April 30, 2027	The third interim progress report (C-1-25-C) reflecting the months of February and March is due.
March - May 2027	Virtual monitoring visits will be conducted.
June 30, 2027	The fourth interim progress report (C-1-25-C) reflecting the months of March through May is due.
On or before 60 days after the grant ends	A final project summary must be received by MSDE 60 days after the grant end date, June 30, 2027.

Notes: Any requests for amendments must be submitted at least 45 days before the grant period ends and must be submitted using the C-125-B form found in the [Grant Budget Forms Workbook](#) on the MSDE grants webpage. Final invoices must be submitted no later than 60 days after the grant period ends.

Grant Application Timeline

This funding opportunity, including all attachments and updates, can be downloaded from the MSDE Office of Grants Administration and Compliance website and the Local Early Childhood Advisory Councils webpage.

Date	Timeline Event
June 22, 2026	The Grant Information Guide and the application for participating are released.
July 9, 2026	MSDE will hold a virtual customer service support session for interested applicants.
July 20, 2026	MSDE will hold a virtual customer service support session for interested applicants.
August 14, 2026	The grant application period closes.
August 20 - September 15, 2026	MSDE Review Committee will evaluate proposals.
September 20, 2026	MSDE will notify applicants of the award status.
October 1, 2026	The grant period begins.
June 30, 2027	The grant period ends.

Non-Discrimination Statement

The Maryland State Department of Education does not discriminate on the basis of age, ancestry/national origin, color, disability, gender identity/expression, marital status, race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation in matters affecting employment or in providing access to programs and activities. For inquiries related to Department policy, please contact:

Equity Assurance and Compliance Office
Office of the Deputy State Superintendent for Operations

Maryland State Department of Education
200 W. Baltimore Street - 2nd Floor
Baltimore, Maryland 21201-2595

410-767-0123 – voice
410-767-0431 – fax
410-333-6442 – TTY/TDD

The General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) Section 427

Each application must develop and describe the steps the applicant proposes to take to ensure access to, and participation in, the project or activity to be conducted with such assistance, by addressing the special needs of children, teachers, families, program providers, and other program beneficiaries to overcome barriers to participation.

Customer Service Support Sessions

The MSDE will hold one customer service support session for interested applicants. During this session, MSDE personnel will provide an overview of the application process. The session will be on:

Thursday, July 9, 2026

10:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

Video call link: https://maryland.zoom.us/meeting/register/o2T_q0FrTYK1rpyM5LQc-w#/registration

Monday, July 20, 2026

2:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Video call link: https://maryland.zoom.us/meeting/register/o2T_q0FrTYK1rpyM5LQc-w#/registration

MSDE staff will also be available to provide technical assistance throughout the grant application process. If you have questions about the application or the process, please contact:

PROGRAM CONTACT

Early Childhood Advisory Council Team: ecac.msde@maryland.gov

This funding opportunity, including all attachments and updates, can be downloaded from the MSDE Office of Grants Administration and Compliance website.

ATTACHMENTS

Local Early Childhood Advisory Council System Improvement Grant FY27 Applications for Funding participation.