



Family Child Care Alliance of
Maryland's ASPIRE Pre-K Program:
EVALUATION REPORT

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Evaluation Report on the ASPIRE Pre-K Program for Family Child Care Educators Implemented by Family Child Care Alliance of Maryland

Introduction

This evaluation examined the Family Child Care Alliance of Maryland's (FCCAMD) ASPIRE Pre-K Program (ASPIRE program) for family child care providers. This evaluation was funded by the Maryland State Department of Education through the Maryland Rebuilds Grant Initiative and conducted by the Johns Hopkins University School of Education.

Established in 2020, the ASPIRE program used coaching, technical assistance, and financial support to scaffold eligible family child care (FCC) educators toward providing high-quality Pre-K programs as defined by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and help these educators achieve certification which allows them to participate in the State's publicly funded Pre-K program. The ASPIRE program is an example of a professional learning program for early care and education (ECE) educators designed to increase equity and access to high-quality ECE. Using academic and professional literature on FCC workforce development, ASPIRE program document analysis, and key informant interviews, the evaluation team at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education examined the ASPIRE program's efforts and impacts to develop recommendations for program improvement, sustainability, and scalability.

ECE Professional Learning and Program Quality

Studies of the importance of ECE to the lives of young children have led to an emphasis on access and equity for an increasingly diverse population of young children and families in the United States. (Espinosa, 2010; Collins, 2012; Fuligni et al., 2009). High-quality ECE programs have proven effective in improving educational achievement, with positive effects that continue for years (e.g., Perry Preschool; Schweinhart, 2005). Longitudinal studies have shown links between attending high-quality ECE programs and higher income, reduced use of drugs, less criminal behavior, and more stable living arrangements among the children who have attended (Reynolds et al., 2002; Schweinhart, 2005; Yoshikawa, 1995). Children participating in high-quality programs have been shown to demonstrate greater language abilities, experience fewer grade retentions, and have less need for remediation support in elementary school (Lynch, 2005; Collins, 2012). Research over decades has strongly suggested a connection between higher education and coaching for ECE educators with better teaching and learning outcomes for children (Barnett, 2004; Burchinal et al., 2002; Doherty et al., 2006; Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015; Koh & Neuman, 2009; Kontos et al., 1995; NICHD ECCRN, 2002; Whitebook, 2003; Zuniga & Howes, 2009).

Family Child Care Context

Licensed family child care settings have been estimated to be the second largest provider of non-relative care to preschoolers in the United States, serving nearly two million young children who spend an average of 33 hours per week in these programs (Figueroa, Barnett, Estevan, & Wiley, 2019; Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2009; Laughlin, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Family child care is a unique synthesis of economic activities, education, and business practices because it is a service provided in exchange for pay; yet the essential character of the work itself is about care and education and is in some cases funded by the government (Uttal, 2010). FCC educators operate child care businesses within their family home, caring for mixed-age groups and typically serving as sole proprietors and caregivers (Bromer & Henly, 2004; Lanigan, 2011). Because they are caregivers, educators, and business owners; they have the acute challenge of providing quality child care and

succeeding in a small business operation. FCC educators represent a unique segment of the education workforce and an important group of small business owners because they operate in the traditionally private setting of care for children, but also involve the public domain of education policy, public funding, and state regulation (Tonyan, 2015). It is critical to recognize that, compared to other care settings, FCC programs tend to serve disproportionately higher percentages of children of color, children whose families have low incomes, immigrant children, children with special needs, and multilingual learners (Maryland Family Network, 2024; Quest, 2018). Over the last 10 years in Maryland, the number of children under age 6 who have custodial parents working increased (1.6 %), as did the number of families below the poverty level (10%), and children who are multilingual learners (89%) (Maryland Family Network, 2024; Maryland Public Schools, 2024).

FCC educators are greatly needed by the ECE system. Promoting a mixed-delivery ECE system will involve increasing the number of FCC educators prepared and qualified to offer Pre-K in their programs. The ASPIRE program was developed to help FCC educators in Maryland advance their education, competency, and program quality to be eligible to offer state-funded slots for children in their programs. This evaluation aimed to explore the program’s development, design, and progress to date in achieving these goals.

Pre-K in Maryland

The state of Maryland has recently allowed private, non-public child care entities to participate in its publicly funded Pre-K program. To participate, these “community partners” are required to have a child care license in good standing, a 3 out of 5 on the State’s QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement System) rating, and specific requirements for the lead teacher in the Pre-K “classroom.” At the time this study was conducted, the requirement for a lead teacher in a community partner was the same as that required for a lead teacher in a public school setting, i.e. a bachelor’s degree in ECE or related field, passing the national teacher exam known as the PRAXIS, an internship within a public elementary school, followed by the issuance of a Pre-K to 3rd grade teaching license from MSDE. Since then, MSDE’s requirements have evolved, and with this evolution there has been a change in educational requirements.

Initially, MSDE required Pre-K teachers to have a bachelor’s degree. However, in 2021, MSDE changed the educational requirements to having a bachelor’s degree and Pre-K certification *or enrolled in a program* for that certification.

According to a 2021 report by the National Institute for Early Education Research, only 24 states (including DC) in the nation allowed FCC to participate in their publicly funded Pre-K programs during the 2019-2020 school year. Maryland was listed as one of those states, though participation by FCC in Maryland’s Pre-K was rare prior to 2020. The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future legislation was passed in 2021 and seeks to transform public education in the State. One of the mandates included in the legislation is near universal Pre-K for four-year-olds by 2031 and spaces for a large section of the State’s three-year-olds. That need for thousands of new Pre-K spaces served as the driver for the creation of what is now known as the ASPIRE PreK program.

Methods

This section explains the data collection and analysis processes involved in the desk review and key informant interviews. The evaluation team investigated the evaluation questions through two concurrent, complementary methods: (a) desk review of relevant documents and data sets; and (b) semi-structured qualitative interviews with four types of key informants who were knowledgeable about the program – participants, coaches, FCCAMD leaders, and system partners. Following a brief description of the methods used to conduct the evaluation, we report in more detail the team’s findings and recommendations.

Research Questions

The evaluation was centered around answering four questions:

1. How has the ASPIRE program evolved since it began?
2. How has coaching been implemented to support FCC educators?
3. How has the program advanced the competencies of FCCs (Family Child Care) seeking Pre-K certification?
4. How do program participants and partners experience the ASPIRE program?

Data Collection for Desk Review

The evaluation team collected ASPIRE program documents and data sets from the program. The documents included program participant demographic data, CLASS scores collected from participating family child care programs, ASPIRE program grant applications, program descriptions, coaching activity logs, and other program documents (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis for Desk Review

The evaluation team conducted a desk review of relevant program documents guided by the evaluation questions using quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques. Sources of data for quantitative analysis included program application spreadsheets, CLASS assessment data and associated analyses, quantitative components of the Instruction Quality Review (IQR) documents generated by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), and a survey of participants conducted by the ASPIRE program leaders. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel and Word software. Sources of data for qualitative analysis included ASPIRE program descriptions, the ASPIRE program website, communications and marketing materials, coaching manuals, and the qualitative components of the Instructional Quality Review documents.

Data Collection for Interviews

In addition to desk review of program documents, the evaluation team conducted key informant interviews with individuals in varied roles. We interviewed ASPIRE program leaders to become familiar with the background and goals of the program, coaches to gain a view into how they provided supports, ASPIRE participants to glean their perspectives on what it has meant for them to be involved, and system partners from school districts and other ECE support organization to better understand how the ASPIRE program is situated within Maryland's ECE landscape in the state.

We developed a sampling frame using contact information from ASPIRE program officers to invite participation. Recruitment messages, study information, and interview protocols were reviewed and approved by the JHU Institutional Review Board. The evaluation team invited 69 individuals to participate in an individual or group interview; 48 were ASPIRE educators, nine were system partners, two were program officers, and 10 were coaches. After inviting participants and receiving their informed consent we conducted individual and group interviews using the Zoom virtual meeting platform (www.zoom.us). Interviews were recorded through Zoom and transcribed using Notta.ai software (www.notta.ai/en). In total, we conducted 23 individual interviews with two ASPIRE program officers, 16 ASPIRE program participants, and five system partners, as well as one group interview with eight ASPIRE coaches (see Table 1).

Table 1*Key Informant Interviews*

Role	Number	Transcript Pages		Interview Minutes	
		Average	Total	Average	Total
ASPIRE Provider	16	8	129	28	448
ASPIRE Coach*	8	19	19	69	69
ASPIRE Leader	2	15	29	49	98
System Partners	5	5	25	14	71

*Coach interviews were conducted during a single focus group

Data Analysis for Interviews

Three coders first analyzed transcripts independently using the a priori codes identified for each research question then listed and defined additional codes they observed while reviewing the data. The evaluation team then collaboratively reconciled the use of the a priori codes and the lists of emergent codes (see Appendix B).

Findings

In this section we present our findings related to each evaluation question; questions 2-4 also include recommendations related to improvement, sustainability, and scalability of the ASPIRE program.

Question 1 – How has the ASPIRE program evolved since it began?

To expand the number of Maryland children participating in high-quality Pre-K programs, it is necessary to increase the number of FCC educators who are certified in Maryland to deliver Pre-K instruction. The FCCAMD saw the opportunity to address this need in 2020 and received funding from MSDE to work with FCC educators to participate in the state-funded Pre-K system. This FCCAMD pilot program became known as the ASPIRE program in 2022.

Leaders of the ASPIRE specified the following program goals:

1. To increase the supply of Pre-K certified teachers providing high-quality Pre-K instruction in FCC homes.
2. To build a support network for Pre-K certified teachers working in FCC homes.
3. To ensure all children, regardless of eligibility, in FCC-based Pre-K programs are kindergarten-ready.
4. To lead the effort to design and test systems to best support Pre-K in FCC homes and make those findings available across the field.

However, these goals will shift slightly in the coming year as Pre-K certification will no longer be required by the MSDE in order to offer publicly funded pre-K in the state.

The program began in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 15 participants enrolled. Since its pilot year, 2020-21, a total of 88 FCC educators have participated in the ASPIRE Pre-K program. During that pilot year, MSDE waived the requirement of a four-year degree for participation in publicly funded Pre-K. Fifteen educators were recruited to participate in the 2020-21 cohort, which was delivered virtually. In the spring of 2021, the program requirements were changed for the 2021-22 school year, as mandated by MSDE. As a result, only educators with four-year degrees could receive Pre-K funding. Thus, the following year, FCCAMD divided the program into two separate sections: one

group (Pre-K) that was eligible to receive funding to deliver Pre-K instruction (having a teacher with a bachelor's degree and Pre-K certification or enrolled in a program for that certification) and another (Pre-K Prep) that served FCC educators who were working on their first bachelor's degree (and eventually Pre-K certification). The unfunded cohort receives the same coaching and other benefits as those in the funded cohort.

As a result, 12 of the educators in the original cohort of 15 left the program as they did not have four-year degrees and had no desire to obtain one at that time. Two of the educators in the original cohort did have degrees and elected to return for the 2021-22 school year and received state funding. One of the original cohorts, without a degree, elected to stay on, without funding, and join a newly created cohort for educators on a degree track but not yet eligible for state funding. These (unfunded) educators receive all of the same services from the ASPIRE program as those in the funded group, except state funding.

Since beginning with 15 participants in 2020, the ASPIRE program has grown at a relatively stable pace. A total of 63 have participated in the funded program, with 25 more in the unfunded group. Participants now come from 17 Maryland counties, up from just two at the program's beginning. Since 2021, the program has experienced an attrition rate of 11.7% due to a wide variety of reasons, including closing businesses, lost housing, the inability to attract eligible children, and the educator realizing that they did not want to teach Pre-K. At the time of this evaluation, there were 48 funded and 19 unfunded participants.

Demographic information on participants was available only from surveys of current participants conducted in 2022-23 and 2023-24. Data from the most recent survey indicated that participants were diverse in age and ethnicity. About half were in their 30s or 40s (evenly split), with almost 40% in their 50s, and 10% in their 60s. More than half (54%) were African American, a third were White (37%), with 9% Hispanic and the rest Asian (3%) or identifying as having multiple ethnicities (2%). Their years of experience in operating an FCC business also varied: about a quarter had 0-5 years' experience (24%), about 30% had more than 20 years' experience (25%), with the rest distributed in between.

Question 2 – How has coaching been implemented to support FCC educators?

The goals of the ASPIRE program include increasing the supply of publicly funded Pre-K programs in FCC homes across Maryland. ASPIRE uses coaching to help providers deliver high-quality Pre-K. Studies have found that FCC educators, compared to ECE educators in other settings, had less formal education and were less likely to attend professional development trainings (Durden et al., 2016; Fuligni et al., 2009). Due to their long and often irregular work hours as well as a lack of available substitutes, FCC educators need learning support that meets them where they are both in terms of professional learning and geography. To develop FCC educators' practice, the ASPIRE program has relied on on-site instructional coaching coupled with virtual visits, among other technical assistance and financial support. ASPIRE coaches are experienced teachers and adult educators and focused on helping ASPIRE FCC participants learn in ways that qualify them to offer publicly funded Pre-K slots and advance their knowledge, skills, and credentials.

Coaching has been a foundational element of the ASPIRE program since the program began and has been implemented as a partnership between instructional coaches and educators to strengthen teaching and learning supports. As indicated above, changes in MSDE policy influenced educational requirements for receiving Pre-K funding and, therefore, the division of participants into two cohorts. While cohorts differed in level of education and certification when entering, both cohorts received the same level of coaching and benefits.

Early in ASPIRE’s implementation, it became evident to program leaders that a discrete coaching framework and in-depth coach training was needed to ensure all coaches had the knowledge and skills to consistently support FCC educators to become Pre-K educators. Since launching, FCCAMD leaders have made four critical advancements in the coaching program; in 2020-21, they developed a coaching framework that served as an early structure for the supports they would offer; in 2021-22, they increased the number of coaches from one to five in order to provide more regular and reliable contact for participants (at the time of the evaluation there were 9.5 FTE in coaches) and started offering in-person coaching since the COVID lockdowns had subsided; and in 2022-23 they began developing the coaching framework into a handbook (which is still evolving). Developed between 2022 and 2024, the “ASPIRE Educator Coaching Framework” was designed in collaboration with coaches to support home-based child care educators develop high-quality Pre-K programs in their homes. In the coming years, they discussed their aim to refine their system of document collection and reporting and increase the level of support and guidance they provide coaches.

Coaching as an instructional support, in general, is a strengths-based professional learning modality focused on providing options, observations, and opportunities while respectfully helping a person hold themselves accountable for their goals. Effective instructional coaches use observation as an entry point to other aspects of their coaching work, modeling to demonstrate desired practice or outcomes, and specific and timely feedback using multiple forms of delivery. An essential element of coaching focuses on helping another person engage in continuous learning by asking, not telling, and by providing thought-provoking feedback rather than judgment (Yang et al., 2022). Therefore, change through coaching relies on strong relationships built on trust, empathy, and partnership, which enable the coach to provide support and guidance and set the stage for the individual receiving coaching to accept constructive feedback. Coaching relationships emphasize self-identified goals and provide opportunities for the one being coached to self-reflect and grow. We found these research-based principles for effective instructional coaching were embedded throughout the ASPIRE coaching program and practiced by ASPIRE coaches.

ASPIRE educator interviewees shared primarily positive feedback about the coaching program, the coaches themselves, and the strategies coaches use to support educator growth and development.

The coaching model was designed to provide structured coaching materials, resources, and manuals, as well as methods to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of coaching. Emphasizing the importance of relationships in coaching success, the framework was built on the seven principles of partnerships in instructional coaching (Knight, 2021). Coaches who have been with the program since the beginning indicated that the coaching framework was a vital addition to increase their capacity to deliver high-quality mentoring and saw room for continued growth. One coach stated her belief that the program would benefit from a stronger mission statement that emphasized the role of instructional coaching in closing the achievement gap. Another emphasized a need for greater consistency in practices among coaches, a sentiment echoed by multiple educators. In this section, we detail core aspects of the ASPIRE coaching program, including (a) the ASPIRE coaches, (b) relationship-based professional learning, and (c) the ASPIRE participants’ experience of the coaching program.

ASPIRE Coaches. In selecting coaches among applicants, ASPIRE program leaders sought individuals with high emotional quotients, motivated team players, and a wide variety of backgrounds, but all focused on ECE. Applicants hired to be coaches demonstrated soft skills such as a passion for

their work and were relationship-oriented, compatible with other coaches and participants, and willing to collaborate.

ASPIRE coaches had a range of professional experience related to early childhood education and elementary education, some with decades of experience. Coaches' resumes showed that all 11 coaches had experience in early childhood education, with four as ECE site directors, two as lead teachers, and five as quality improvement coaches/mentors. Also, five coaches had experience as elementary school teachers or principals, and three as adjunct faculty in institutes of higher education. All had either a bachelor's or master's degree, with six in early childhood education, three in elementary education, two in education administration, two in special education, and two in instructional technology. Although they may not have worked in family child care in the past, their range of education and experience, support for one another, and requisite soft skills and training are keys to the success of the coaching program. One provider noted of her coach, "She is good at noticing what I need and knowing what it takes as a Pre-K or elementary educator because she has the experience inside the school system."

The ASPIRE Coaching Program. The three-year ASPIRE program included coaching for the nine months of the school year with limited summer month support depending on educator needs, with in-person visits for observation, modeling, debriefing, and discussion. The ASPIRE Coaching Framework Manual (FCCAMDMD, 2024) outlined a month-by-month plan to promote fidelity to the evidence-informed model and a consistent experience for ASPIRE participants across coaches. In most cases, ASPIRE FCC educators also received weekly one-hour coaching sessions held by phone or virtually, and coaches were available between meetings (often nights and weekends) for support as needed by the educators they supported. Some participants described challenges that they experienced with finding opportunities to connect with their coaches on a weekly basis. In addition to the meetings with individual educators, professional growth and networking was facilitated through cohort meetings during which educators were encouraged to share recent experiences in the practice, how their learning environments looked, and how adjustments to their FCC space, for example, could better facilitate children's learning.

According to interviews with both educators and coaches, the emphasis on relationship-building was the key reason that coaching had been effective. Building trusting relationships was critical to coaches because, as one coach put it, "We have to make sure we have that relationship with them before we go in and try to make any changes to improve." Also, coaches must "recognize this is their home, this is their space, this is where they live, and this is what they have. So, we have to work within that and make sure we're still meeting the children's needs," said another. An ASPIRE program leader described that this was by design:

The biggest part of our coaching program is the relationships, because each coach goes in there and has to be willing and open, and the provider needs to be willing and open. You have to build up all this trust, and that's a huge hallmark of the coaching program. Our coaches from go say, "I'm not here to tell you what you're doing wrong. I am here to help you be better."

Our analysis of interviews with educators and coaches revealed that these kinds of trusting relationships paved the way for authentic reflection and open dialogue about successes, challenges, and areas of improvement in five key areas of quality: (i) the physical environment, (ii) instruction, (iii) family engagement, (iv) curriculum, and (v) educator-child interactions. Coaches helped educators set goals about their knowledge of child development, curriculum planning, and classroom management, as well as assessment and data analysis. These goals were tracked over time and

included in the Quality Improvement Conversation (QIC) tool, which summarized observational and self-assessments and assessments of quality practices. Coaches provided training and support on the CLASS assessment and Instructional Quality Review (IQR) to prepare educators to reach levels of quality required by the Pre-K grant program. The official IQR reports are generated by MSDE. Coaching also involved consistent and ongoing encouragement for educators to continue their education, complete necessary training, and take the Praxis certification examination needed to become a Pre-K provider under the guidelines of the MSDE grant program administered at the time of this report.

ASPIRE participants received a variety of tools and resources as well, and coaches provided training and support to use them effectively in practice.

Coaching opened up my eyes to see really how an amazing coach can be part of your process, how they can set targets for you. That you continue to get better like you can see the process, you can see how much you have grown.

The structured ECE curriculum used by the ASPIRE program, Creative Curriculum Pre-K, was aligned with Maryland’s early learning standards for children birth through age 8. It also aligned to Teaching Strategies GOLD (a formative assessment) and Brightwheel (a child care management software). A virtual document sharing and communication interface called “Coaching Corner” also supported ongoing professional learning and reflection opportunities through links to instructional resources such as audio and visual materials, photographs, and other teaching and learning tools. A few FCC educators appreciated their coach’s support of their business practices and improving efficiencies that reduced the amount of time providers needed to spend on administrative tasks. However, supporting business skills is not a focus of the ASPIRE program.

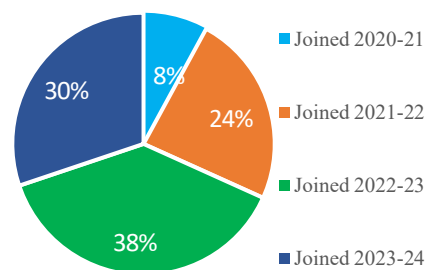
ASPIRE Participants’ Experiences with the Coaching Program. Educators mentioned their coaches’ availability, dedication, responsiveness, resourcefulness, encouragement, and knowledge of school requirements as highly influential in helping them advance personally and professionally and reach the Pre-K quality goals. They commented on their coaches’ support for their vision for their FCC program rather than the coaches imposing their own. In turn, coaches commented on noticeable changes in educators’ growth mindsets and the degree to which they identified as professionals. The educators we interviewed unanimously agreed that the coaching program helped them improve their programs and reach their professional goals. Data from a survey conducted by the ASPIRE leader in January 2024, with responses from 63 participants, described participants’ experiences with the Coaching Program. The distribution of respondents by year of joining ASPIRE is shown below.

The brief survey asked two questions:

1. What three aspects of the coaching program have been most impactful to your practice?
2. What aspects outside of the scope of the coaching process would you like more support with?

Educators described seven important aspects of the coaching program that are detailed below: (i) reflective meetings, (ii) observation cycles, (iii) curriculum, (iv)

Figure 1. Survey Participants by Year

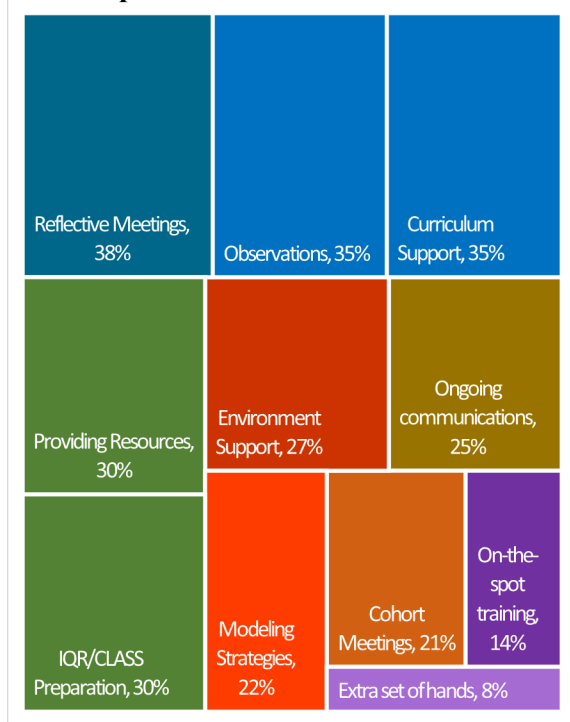


resources, (v) IQR and CLASS preparation, (vi) coaching on the learning environment, and (vii) cohort meetings. The survey data showed that reflective meetings (38%), observations (35%), and curriculum support (35%) were the aspects of the coaching program rated by educators as valuable to helping them improve their ECE practices and environments. See Figure 2 for additional aspects of the program that participants found impactful.

Reflective Meetings. We found that these on-on-one interactions between coaches and ASPIRE participants were at the center of the coaching program. At their most frequent, these meetings occurred weekly; in some cases, they occurred bi-weekly. Reflective meetings took place either in-person or virtually as a means of addressing ASPIRE participants’ questions, setting goals, and discussing FCC educators’ progress. Typically, these meetings followed observation cycles. The educators we interviewed shared mixed perspectives about the frequency of these meetings. Some would have preferred more frequent interactions with their coaches, particularly during their first year. Others were comfortable with the amount of interaction but would prefer more in-person connection rather than virtual coaching sessions.

Observation Cycles. Observation cycles took place in the FCC setting and gave coaches opportunities to witness the interactions between ASPIRE participants and the children and families they served. In practice, there was a tight connection between reflective meetings and observation cycles, typically the former following the latter, which may explain why these two features of the coaching program were rated as most impactful to educators’ practice. For example, one provider commented on how her coach “does observation and reflections with me, looks at what I might be teaching, and then we go over and discuss what worked, what didn't, gives me ideas, and helps me in areas where I still need growth.”

Figure 2. Which Three Aspects of the Coaching Program Have Been Most Impactful to Providers' Practice?



Curriculum. Coaches described the need to ensure educators had a research-based curriculum, and “the supports in place so that each one of those kids has the best chance at having that strong foundation for learning as they grow older.” Most educator interviewees mentioned having received Creative Curriculum materials as well as support implementing it. Educators valued this part of the coaching program, citing the benefits of having a developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessment, which they did not have prior to joining the ASPIRE program. More than one-third of survey respondents rated curriculum and curriculum support as one of the three most impactful aspects of the coaching program on their practice.

Resources. Nearly one-third of survey respondents mentioned additional resources they received from their coaches as impactful to their ECE practices. During interviews, educators discussed a range of resources, including tools to help their business

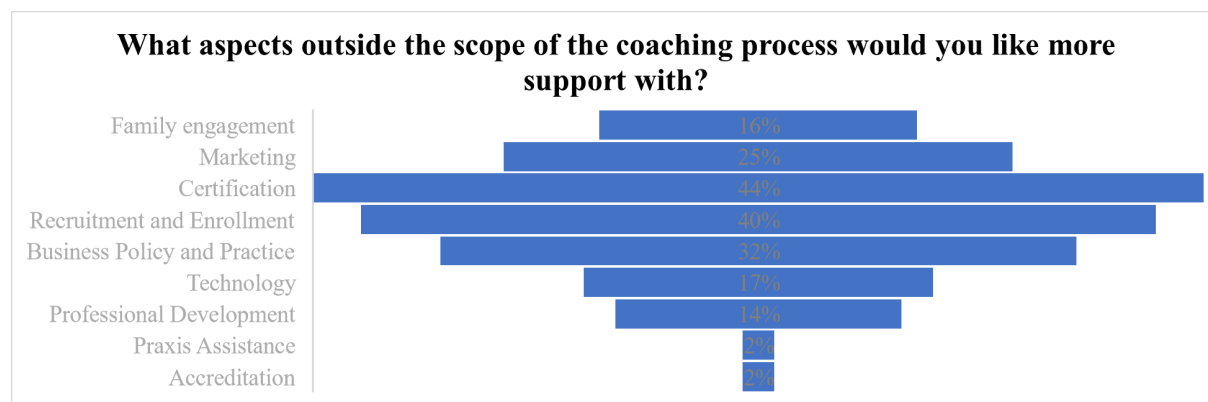
practices, information about websites to get new ideas, the “Coaching Corner,” access to financial resources to buy instructional materials, and a revolving loan to cover costs between invoicing and reimbursement from MSDE, as well as additional resources for their classroom.

IQR and CLASS Preparation. The ASPIRE coaching program used IQR and CLASS observational assessments as launching points for developing educators’ growth goals and benchmarks of progress; 30% of survey respondents rated these as key supports for their improvement. Interviewees who mentioned IQR and CLASS did so in the context of coach observations and reflective meetings to set growth goals, identify resources, and improve the environment. The ASPIRE program has used Teachstone-trained observers to conduct the CLASS assessment, and the IQR reports are generated by MSDE.

Coaching in the Learning Environment. A focal point of ASPIRE’s coaching for educators included information and resources to help them create rich learning environments in their FCC homes. These supports were rated as highly valuable by 30% of survey respondents. Interviewees described various ways that their coaches had helped them improve their environment and instruction, using the provider’s goals to guide changes. For example, one coach worked with a provider on ways to convert spaces in her home into activity centers that were more manageable for children to learn through play, while maintaining her home as a living space. One provider described how her coach “came in and asked what my vision was and how I wanted it to align with the curriculum I was teaching.” Both educators and coaches also commented on demonstrable changes in behavior management strategies and relationships with families resulting from coach support. Interviewees also commented on their coaches’ roles in their more intentional asking of open-ended questions and the difference they have observed in children’s use of language and engagement in learning activities.

Cohort Meetings. Survey results showed cohort meetings were highly rated by fewer educators (21%) than other aspects of the coaching program. Although these opportunities were not often among the top three areas described by survey participants, interviewees identified cohorts as a strength of the coaching program, valuing peer-to-peer learning and friendships developed through those opportunities. For many educators, these experiences were highly valuable because they address the isolation often experienced by FCC educators working in their homes.

In the survey, educators were asked, “What aspects outside of the scope of the coaching process would you like more support with?” Most frequently, educators mentioned a need for assistance with Pre-K certification requirements.



The long-term measure of impact in support of the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future is that family child care is seen as a high-quality, competitive Pre-K option in the Maryland early childhood mixed-delivery system. The evaluation team found that the ASPIRE coaching program contributed to that long-term goal by increasing the number of FCC educators participating in the Maryland Pre-K grant program. The prerequisites to achieving that goal were minimum levels of assessed quality and education/certification. The ASPIRE coaching program showed demonstrable changes in program quality among the ASPIRE participants and in the number of educators increasing their education and earning their Pre-K certification.

Evolution of the Coaching Program. Nearly every interviewee commented on the ASPIRE program as a “work in progress.” By far, the coaching program was the strength most often cited by interviewees. Several educators described the ASPIRE program leaders’ responsiveness to suggestions made by coaches and educators about how to improve the coaching program. When asked to complete a survey about potential improvements in the ASPIRE program overall and the coaching program specifically, program officers, coaches, and educators remarked that initial stages of the coaching program lacked structure, clear benchmarks, and consistent communication. Development of the ASPIRE Coaching Framework Manual and training on effective instructional coaching practices helped bolster coach capacity, increased coach-to-coach support and networking, and improved consistency of messaging. Further, the recent hire of a Director of Professional Advancement, a new position for the program, was expected to improve the alignment of benchmarks to the Pre-K quality standards.

Educators requested more in-person coaching and more coaching in the first year, then tapering over the three years. The program began during the pandemic, during which coaching was limited to virtual delivery. Since then, coaches have visited educators at least once per month. In most cases, educators receive two physical visits per month. Geography was also an issue for educators. Nearly every educator noted that coaches were spread thin, and the educators they served were often geographically distributed across the state, which reduced the ability of coaches to conduct more in-person mentoring and support. While cohorts were described as invaluable to educators’ professional growth, they suggested that cohort members be closer geographically to facilitate local advocacy and face-to-face networking.

Despite the recommended improvements, interviewees unanimously identified the coaching program and the resources, training, and mentoring provided as the key strengths of the ASPIRE program. Program leaders stated their commitment to finding solutions to challenges expressed by educators and coaches as well as ensuring that the program aligns with changing MSDE Pre-K eligibility requirements. Educators also commented on those officers’ responsiveness to their recommendations.

Recommendations Related to Question 2. Based on analysis of relevant literature, ASPIRE program data, and participant interviews, we offer the following recommendations:

- 2.1 Continue to develop and implement stronger recordkeeping and data management practices. Over time, coaching visits, CLASS assessments, and IQR evaluations could generate a great deal of data that could assist in individual provider supports as well as general program improvement. Whether through web-based applications, shared file and recording systems, or other processes; examine how ASPIRE can focus efforts on valid, reliable, and transparent output and outcome data to better monitor the impact they have on the educators and the families they serve.

- 2.2 Continue to expand the number of coaches and consider part-time coaches to increase the reliable dosage for first-year participants. Maryland General Assembly House Bill 1441 provides that future Pre-K teachers in community-based programs will not be required to have Pre-K certification from the state; therefore, 1) ASPIRE may be positioned to greatly increase the number of educators who would join and 2) as a result ASPIRE will require additional coaches for first-year cohort members. Although there is not a clear mark for many coaching hours leading to efficacy, based on evidence from previous studies and perspectives of ASPIRE educators and coaches, too little coaching is not enough. Further, in-person coaching is highly valuable, especially for first-year participants. Increasing outreach to career changers, retired teachers, and individuals from nearby states may be beneficial in addition to exploring how to structure more part-time, flexible positions in remote areas and creating substitute positions that allow ASPIRE completers to leave programs from time to time to support new ASPIRE educators as their coaches.
- 2.3 Clarify and operationalize the link between ASPIRE support and closing the equity, access, and opportunity gaps for young children. As the program continues to develop clarity and fidelity to the coaching model while potentially onboarding additional coaches, focus on how coaching, and other ASPIRE supports, impact not just the educators but the children, the families, and the broader system. By clarifying how particular practices and procedures serve these aims and coupling those efforts with improved data collection and analysis, ASPIRE will be better positioned to actualize and describe its potential impact on the children, families, and the future ECE in Maryland.

Question 3 – How has the program advanced the competencies of FCCs seeking Pre-K Certification?

A qualified FCC workforce is a key component of supporting high-quality family-based care (Swartz et al., 2016). Studies have suggested that FCC educators’ professional experience and education backgrounds vary more widely than do those of their center-based peers and that home-based educators are less likely to seek and receive ongoing professional development that supports quality care (Fulgini et al., 2009; Swartz et al., 2016). Numerous studies have linked children’s positive developmental and learning outcomes with the quality of the ECE programming those children experienced and with the professional learning backgrounds of the programs’ educators (Currie & Thomas, 1995; Kelton et al., 2013; Porter et al., 2010; Vandell & Wolf, 2000).

The ASPIRE program was designed to “help Maryland FCC providers deliver high-quality Pre-K programs as part of the statewide Pre-K expansion efforts” (FCCAMD, 2023). They have increased the number of highly qualified FCC providers in Maryland through guidance and coaching tailored to the unique needs of family childcare providers. In this section we describe our findings regarding (a) how the ASPIRE participants described their experiences working toward Pre-K certification and (b) how program leaders, coaches, and participants described the program’s impact on educators’ competency.

Pre-K Certification. The ASPIRE program was designed to support family child care educators’ advancement in skill and quality as well as to assist them in earning their Pre-K certification. When MSDE required pursuing Pre-K certification to offer state-funded Pre-K, ASPIRE

helped providers do so. During the evaluation period, this policy was revised. The certification requirement was removed and superseded by new pathways to Pre-K qualification that do not require Pre-K certification. According to the MSDE, “Beginning in the 2025-2026 school year, all Pre-K teachers must be state certified in early childhood education or hold a bachelor’s degree and be pursuing residency through the Maryland Approved Alternative Preparation Program, which includes early childhood coursework, clinical practice, and evidence of pedagogical content knowledge” (MSDE, 2024).

We discussed with participants their experiences getting support from ASPIRE as they worked toward Pre-K certificates when these were required. Among the providers we interviewed, some were not thinking of certification before joining the program. In a few cases, educators were certified prior to entering the program, and others were certified to teach in elementary schools. As of the writing of this report, six ASPIRE participants achieved their Pre-K certification.

Coaches and educators also described less-tangible outcomes. One coach remarked, “I think that’s the biggest change I’ve seen is within the educators themselves.” A provider agreed, saying, “It really just changed how I look at early childhood completely.” Among the educators we interviewed who were not already certified, some were not thinking of certification before joining the program. During the evaluation period, the requirements for Pre-K teachers changed and Pre-K certification would no longer be necessary.

ASPIRE Prompted Interest and Provided Opportunity. For ASPIRE educators who were not previously certified, some explained that without the program, they would not have even considered certification because the time and challenge involved seemed to them to be too great to do alone. One provider expressed, “I’m not sure that I would have gone into Pre-K certification on my own.” Another provider said joining the program gave her a chance to get back to finishing a degree she did not think she would otherwise have been able to. She explained, “At my age, certification was not what I was looking for. I wouldn’t have prior to ASPIRE, but when I saw that it was a requirement, it didn’t faze me because I always said I would continue schooling.”

The ASPIRE program’s requirement that participants earn Pre-K certification gave the individuals we interviewed the motivation and support to complete their education and further develop their competency in providing high-quality early care and education. The participants we interviewed explained that the ASPIRE program supported them through (i) guidance, technical assistance as well as (ii) encouragement and advocacy as they made efforts to complete their education and earn Pre-K certification.

Guidance and Technical Assistance. For some ASPIRE participants, the certification information provided by MSDE was sufficient. One provider expressed that she was “...one of those people that, if you tell me what I need, I can just go ahead and do it on my own. But I know that there is help available. I just haven’t really asked.” However, some ASPIRE participants needed additional support navigating the requirements and accessing courses they needed to complete certification. ASPIRE coaches were positioned to share information that has helped these educators submit their education verification paperwork. One provider said, “I knew I could do it, but I didn’t have the education verification. It was through ASPIRE that got us the information to get those last three classes, which I’m finishing up this semester for free.”

Encouragement and Advocacy. In addition to information about how to navigate the statewide ECE certification system, multiple participants explained that the encouragement and advocacy they

experienced from the ASPIRE coaches and program leaders were very meaningful to them. Stated simply by one provider, “It’s nice to have somebody that can help if there’s a problem.” The kinds of help educators discussed included Praxis test preparation, encouraging conversations, and policy advocacy. For many child care educators, standardized certification exams can be daunting. The participants we interviewed explained how the guidance they received from ASPIRE coaches motivated them and helped them feel prepared. One explained that she appreciated that her coach gave her a preparation book that included practice tests because she struggled with reading online. Although she did not pass on her first attempt, the encouragement she received from her coach motivated her to try again:

I didn’t pass, but I was so close! But I was only close because I had those resources. And if I can dig deeper into those resources, I’ll pass. But had I not gotten her help, I would have been like, no, I’m not. I’m not doing the Praxis. No, I’m not doing the certification. But ASPIRE has given me, even though I’m the age that I am, desire to go on. I still want to as opposed to years ago when I wasn’t even thinking about it.

This kind of encouragement and motivation came up repeatedly among the educators we interviewed. Many worked very long hours and would not have otherwise had the time to find out what steps they needed to take, let alone have had the time or confidence to take them. As another provider expressed:

My coach, she basically was very encouraging, like, “You can do this! Here is what you need.” She provided a lot of the information because, like I said, I didn’t even know what the Praxis tests were because I had never had the desire to become certified because I was happy in family childcare.

In addition to the hands-on support that they received from coaches, educators we interviewed were also aware that ASPIRE program leaders advocated for their interests at the state level. In one of these examples a provider explained:

Something else ASPIRE has done is they’ve been in committee meetings and stuff to get it so that we can do our student teaching in our homes. Then I don’t have to shut my childcare down in the fall after I’ve done all my classes and go to the public school for an internship; I have no desire to go teaching over there. I can do it in the environment that I’m actually wanting to teach in!

Earning Certification. Although at the time of the evaluation, most ASPIRE educators were somewhere in the process of taking the courses and tests needed for certification, six participants completed their certification requirements while in the program. Through guidance, technical assistance, encouragement, and advocacy, ASPIRE program leaders explained that their goal was to see 500 FCC educators participate in the state’s Pre-K program by 2031. However, during the evaluation period a change in Maryland state statute prompted discussion of changes in the ASPIRE programs’ goals. As a result of HB 1441, future Pre-K teachers in community-based programs will not be required to have Pre-K certification from the state, so the program would no longer require participants to be certified as it is currently defined. However, a program leader explained they planned to continue to encourage and support P-3 certification as a career goal. The implications of this change include the possibility of opening access to more funded educators in the ASPIRE

program, as the distinction between funded and unfunded programs two hinged, at the time, on an educator's pursuing Pre-K certification. With more educators eligible to receive payments for eligible children, ASPIRE leaders anticipate both greater enrollment in the program and a gradual decrease in the number of educators in the unfunded section of the program.

Developing Dispositions and ECE Competency in the ASPIRE Program. Beyond helping educators earn their formal Pre-K certifications, ASPIRE coaches and program leaders aimed to help educators develop the competencies needed to offer high-quality FCC programs. Participants we interviewed discussed six areas of professional growth they attributed to their experiences in the ASPIRE program: (i) developing their educator identity, (ii) formalizing their program processes, (iii) using a structured curriculum, (iv) differentiating teaching, (v) improving environments, and (vi) improving interactions.

Developing Their Educator Identity. Educators in the ASPIRE program varied in their years of experience. Whether they were veterans or newer to the field, the participants we interviewed discussed how ASPIRE activities helped them to grow as educators. One individual expressed enthusiastically:

I have grown so much professionally. I've learned so much through my peers. There's always refreshing new ideas, new ways to look at things. You asked me, how have I grown? Yeah, it's given us opportunities to do training and meet up with our colleagues and learn about events and educational opportunities. I mean, oh, gosh, it's a whole lot.

The kinds of support provided go beyond what some had experienced in their previous college course work and training. One provider said, "I feel like I've learned more from being with ASPIRE than I have in six and a half years of college." Educators appreciated that they could both experience growth and make career advancements without feeling disparagement about their previous practice, as one provider explained:

I feel my program has always been a pretty great program, but because of ASPIRE, I know that my program is higher quality than it was before. I have the national accreditation qualification now. I have [Maryland] EXCELS level 5 rating now. And I can use that quality to market my program.

Educators also credited their experience with ASPIRE for helping them build specific skill sets that they did not have before, such as working with young children or supporting children with special needs and their families.

Formalizing Program Processes. In addition to building concrete skill sets, increasing program recognition, and experiencing a sense of growth as an educator; interviewees described how participating in ASPIRE and receiving guidance from their coach had encouraged them to formalize some of their practices in ways that improved their program. As one provider said, "I think it formalized our educational process. It's helped us to show how we are effective and helped us to better communicate with the parents with what we're doing." Some educators explained that by formalizing these processes they gained credibility among parents and reduced their own frustration. For example, one provider explained that through formalizing processes related to her daily program routine, children's challenging behaviors decreased, and as a result, her own wellbeing increased.

Using a Structured Curriculum. One area of practice that educators discussed at length was their use of a structured curriculum.

I just thought I was doing great. I mean, you know, I always thought I have a passion for what I do. So, I know I always do good work. I always get a lot of positive feedback from families. But being a part of ASPIRE and seeing things from a different lens and being exposed to new opportunities and the curriculum that we use... Oh, my goodness, I've learned a whole lot. I have really grown. It's work, but I love it.

Other participants had already learned to develop and implement structured curricula; however, doing this successfully was intensive in terms of their own labor and personal financial investments. One provider expressed how receiving the structured curriculum from ASPIRE greatly impacted the quality of her program, children's learning in the program, and her own well-being:

They've given me an entire curriculum that I would never have been able to afford on my own. I had created my own curriculum before because of the monetary thing. This is a rural area. It's a very poor area. Before, I had to mesh together a curriculum with all kinds of books and resources I was able to get second- or thirdhand. But that was a lot of work, now it's a lot of savings on my end.

Having access to the Creative Curriculum, free of charge, helped educators align their work with Maryland ECE standards, expand their teaching skills, and conduct curriculum-based assessments. All these practices enabled ASPIRE participants to build more confidence in their teaching and better support children's kindergarten readiness. One provider described the curriculum as both developmentally appropriate and well-rounded; she explained children learned not only shapes, colors, letters, and numbers but also social-emotional and communication skills in a way that was exploratory and not directive. Multiple educators explained that since they started the ASPIRE program, they had observed children leaving for kindergarten better prepared than those who came through their FCC program in the past. One provider described this reflectively:

The curriculum has made me so much more than I was before. And hands down, my kids were learning, but now [with this curriculum], they have learned far more. Before, I think that maybe I wasn't giving them enough credit...or maybe I was boxing them in too much and I didn't ask enough questions of them. ... Now, it's been more self-reflective, before I was too much in control of what they were learning and not letting them be more comfortable with what they wanted to learn. I was being the holder of all the learning and educating, as opposed to just being a guide jumping in when needed.

Educators' perspectives on the impact of the structured curriculum reflected coaches' intentions as well. Coaches who participated in the group interview discussed the benefits of the curriculum, how they helped educators use it, and their impressions of its value to improving ASPIRE participants' competency as educators. One coach put it simply, "A research-based curriculum gives them that leg up on quality." However, just having the curriculum may not be enough to improve children's

outcomes without training and support to implement it, another coach explained, “I think that that understanding of the *why* and the *how* of the curriculum has really been impactful for many educators who have never really used a real research -based, high-quality curriculum.” To teach the *why* and *how*, coaches provide suggestions, modeling, explanations, and assessment tools.

Differentiating Teaching. FCC programs serve children of a wide range of ages, whereas school-based and center-based Pre-K classrooms traditionally serve 3- and 4-year-olds. One educator summed up her experience with the curriculum and how it helped her differentiate her teaching:

“This curriculum lets me teach it up if I need to or teach it down. ... And it tells me, this kid is here, they should be able to do this next. So, I don't even have to worry that I'm missing the component of what needs to be given. It just guides me to let me know, okay, this person is really grasping this skill, I should be able to tweak it up to here for them. And I like that. Whereas before, I was working with so many mixed-age groups that it was really hard to make sure I was meeting everybody's needs developmentally. So, the curriculum told me what I could do to make sure everybody's needs were being met and that was not the case before.”

These findings suggested that ASPIRE program leaders and coaches have a curriculum that educators find valuable and that educators value the support they receive on how to implement it differently to suit the needs of children of different ages.

Improving Environments. Academic research into ECE program quality has focused in large part on the provisions and arrangements of early learning spaces and the degree to which reliable links have been shown between educators' professional learning and standardized measures of program quality. Learning environments themselves can both hinder or enable children to develop and practice skills (Neuman & Wright, 2010). ECE educators can learn and practice their ability to establish environments that support children's learning and development, though researchers have not consistently found evidence that teachers' level of education predicted the quality of early learning environments (Early et al., 2006; Early et al., 2007; Powell & Diamond, 2010). Studies have shown that educators increased professional engagement (Abell et al., 2014), level of education, and whether they have a college degree with specialization in ECE are correlated with quality in early learning environments, especially if that coursework was combined with a site-based coaching program, such as in the ASPIRE program. In several relevant studies, Neuman and colleagues found that higher education coursework did not lead to improved learning environments unless the course content was offered in combination with on-site coaching visits (Koh & Neuman, 2009; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Neuman & Wright, 2010).

ASPIRE coaches were aware of the potential impact their efforts could make. As one ASPIRE coach said, “There is a pedagogy around how the environment is the third teacher and whether it's intentional or not is the magic word; if educators are receiving intentional coaching about their environment, then they gain an extra educator.” For ECE educators in any setting, learning to establish high-quality environments that are effective for promoting children's learning is challenging. For FCC educators, this can be even more challenging because they share their living and working space (Gunter et al., 2012). Changes they make to the teaching and learning environment affect the spaces they share with families in their off hours. For this reason, it can be particularly difficult for FCC educators to set up high-quality spaces that are both effective for their work and that maintain a livable home. Coaches understood the sensitivity needed to support educators, as one explained:

I just want to make sure that I'm thoughtful in the way that I'm doing it... understanding that this is their home; this is their space; this is where they live; and this is what they have. So, we have to work within that and make sure we're meeting children's needs.

To do this, coaches understood they needed to focus first on relationships:

Changing the environment is a touchy subject at first because we're going into their spaces, and educators tend to be very proud of what they have and what they offer. So as coaches are coming in, we have to make sure we have that relationship with them before we go in and try to make or encourage any changes. The environment is something that is theirs and they have structured it.

The educators we interviewed all mentioned the support they received from coaches as they worked to make changes to their environments that helped them implement the curriculum and meet children's needs while maintaining a functional living space that they admired.

Improving Interactions. A key aspect of ECE program quality is the kind of interaction that children have with their caregivers and other children in the learning environment. The types of interactions between children and educators and among children in an ECE setting have been shown to predict children's learning outcomes. High-quality early learning environments feature positive, nurturing, and thought-provoking conversations characterized by "...sophisticated vocabulary, occurring not only between caregivers and children but between children and their peers" (Hindman & Wasik, 2012, p. 132). Positive teacher-child interactions can serve as a protective factor for children associated with later school readiness, social-emotional, behavioral, and developmental outcomes. Conversely, negative interactions can place children at risk for future negative social interactions. Rich and engaging teacher-child interactions have also been associated with greater social and academic gains for children (Zan & Donegan-Ritter, 2014). Studies reviewed for this evaluation indicated that college courses alone are less likely than training combined with coaching to support lasting improvement in interactions within early learning environments (Conroy et al., 2014; Moreno et al., 2015). The quality of educators' interactions has been shown to improve with professional learning involving site-based coaching, especially during the first year of coaching (Conroy et al., 2015; Hindman & Wasik, 2012). Coaching-based professional learning programs that support rich interactions can also support curriculum knowledge and application (Vartuli et al., 2014) and have been shown to vary in effectiveness based on the frequency, duration, and overall number of coaching hours that educators received (Zan and Donegan-Ritter, 2014).

The ASPIRE program uses the CLASS tool to measure improvements in classroom organization, behavior management, instructional quality, and other aspects of intentional teaching. "The foundation of CLASS is a framework that assesses classroom interactions that matter most to children's development" (CLASS Pre-K Reference Manual, p.46). Several educators commented on the support they received for CLASS observations. For example, one said, "When I did my CLASS scores, they were phenomenal because my coach had helped me. If I had done the CLASS last year, my score probably would have really been bad." Here, we describe CLASS data previously collected by the ASPIRE program leaders that the evaluation team analyzed.

The Pre-K CLASS tool measures classroom interactions in three domains, with research-based benchmarks optimal for children's development and learning and predictive of readiness for

kindergarten and third-grade outcomes. Average scores of 5.0 in the dimensions of Emotional Support, 5.0 in Classroom Organization Domain, and 3.5 in the Instructional Support Domain have been shown to close the achievement gap. In fall 2024, on average, ASPIRE participants exceeded the benchmark of quality in Emotional Support (6.1), and Classroom Organization (5.9), and were approaching the quality benchmark for Instruction Support (3.0). In fact, most educators already met or exceeded the benchmark of quality in the Emotional Support and Classroom Organization Domains when they entered the ASPIRE program. For a detailed analysis of CLASS data see Appendix C (Figures 7-12).

CLASS observation scores provide another source of information on how ASPIRE participants changed over time. These data suggest that participants’ scores were mainly steady across time, with consistently stronger scores in the Emotional Support and Classroom Organization domains and lower scores in the Instructional Support Domain. Changes in participants’ scores within the second and third years of the program provide evidence of growth in all three domains across those two years. However, these increases were coupled with a decrease in the scores in at least one of the other domains. In addition, we note caution when drawing conclusions from these data, as this analysis is purely descriptive, and the data does not appear complete.

ASPIRE program leaders provided the evaluation team a roster of program participants from the fall of 2021 to the spring of 2024, and they provided annual CLASS scores collected each fall and spring. Table 2 shows the number of participants listed on the roster in column A. This column provides a benchmark for the largest number of participant scores that might have been collected. Column B shows how many participant scores were collected during the fall of that school year. Column C shows how many participant spring scores were collected. In addition, the roster shows that many participants were part of ASPIRE for multiple school years. Therefore, column D shows how many participants were new to the ASPIRE program. In contrast, column E shows how many ASPIRE participants had CLASS scores in the prior year.

Table 2
CLASS Assessment Data Counts

School Years	Participants Listed in Roster (A)	Participants with Fall CLASS Scores (B)	Participants with Spring CLASS Scores (C)	New		Returning	
				Participants With CLASS Scores (D)	Participants With CLASS Scores (E)	Participants With CLASS Scores (D)	Participants With CLASS Scores (E)
2020-2021	15	14	14	14	14	0	0
2021-2022	30	25	22	22	22	3	3
2022-2023	55	26	23	15	15	12	12
2023-2024	69	7	0	7	7	0	0

Table 2 shows that not all participants had CLASS scores. Comparison between columns A and B shows that the number of participants without CLASS scores increased over time. Specifically, almost all (14 out of 15) ASPIRE participants had CLASS scores during the 2020-21 school year. However, a gap steadily grew between the listed participants and participants with CLASS scores over time. For example, less than half of the listed participants had CLASS scores by the 2022-23 school year. Specifically, the roster listed 55 participants in 2022-23, but only 26 had fall CLASS scores. The bottom of the table shows comparisons of funded participants only. Comparisons of these participants and column B also provide evidence of growing, but more modest, potentially missing data over time. This also may be due to a change in who received the CLASS assessment; it may be that earlier

in the program CLASS scores represented educators in both funded and unfunded programs, whereas data provided for 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 represent only participants in the funded programs.

In addition, comparing columns B and C in Table 2 shows that a modest number of participants were missing spring CLASS data. Specifically, all participants with CLASS scores in 2020-21 had scores in both the fall and the spring. However, three participants in each of the two subsequent school years had scores collected in the fall but not the spring. CLASS scores from the spring of 2024 were not available at the time of this report. Columns D and E show that almost all participant scores in the first two school years were from new ASPIRE participants. Therefore, changes across these two school years cannot be interpreted as growth in participants. These data show that almost half of participants in the 2022-23 school year were returning, demonstrating a greater overlap in participants between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years.

We took these data features into account when considering the graphs below as readers of this report should. For example, the source of the discrepancy between the participants listed on the roster and CLASS scores needs to be clarified. Similarly, the incomplete fall and spring scores suggested the possibility of missing data. Missing data can bias results, as those missing might have different average scores than participants with complete CLASS data. Thus, although the CLASS data does provide some suggestive evidence of partitioners' classroom practices, we suggest caution when drawing strong or definitive conclusions from these data.

To assess average scores over time, we first investigated the average CLASS scores of all participants in each period, from the fall and spring scores of the 2020-21 school year through the fall scores of the 2023-24 school year. The figures below present these scores at the domain level, although graphs featuring the dimension scores are shown in the appendix. Figure 3 shows average participant Emotional Support domain scores across time. These domain scores are close to 6 points, ranging from 5.79 to 6.33, across all school years. Note that scores are lowest during ASPIRE's first year and highest during the spring of the 2021-22 and fall of the 2022-23 school years. This figure suggests that ASPIRE participants had consistently high Emotional Support scores throughout the program. In addition, the fact that participants were almost entirely different during ASPIRE's first, second, and fourth years suggests that participants either entered the program with strong Emotional Support scores or rapidly strengthened their scores before fall CLASS scores were collected. Furthermore, in the more recent years, CLASS scores represent only funded program participants, whereas, in earlier years, both groups were represented.

It is important to note that across years, CLASS Emotional Support scores were on par with the Head Start national average (6.03) (ECLKC, 2021), and well-above the threshold suggested by Teachstone (5.0) and proven by research as optimal for to predict child outcomes. Classrooms with strong instructional support scores have educators who are sensitive to their needs.

Figure 3: CLASS Emotional Support Domain Scores



Figure 4 shows average participant Classroom Organization domain scores across the same period. Specifically, this figure indicates that Classroom Organization scores are all between 5 and 6 points, ranging between 5.37 and 5.91. Thus, these scores are relatively high but slightly lower than the Emotional Support scores. These scores followed similar patterns to the Emotional Support scores. For example, Classroom Organizational scores were lowest during educators’ first year of ASPIRE. Similarly, Classroom Organization scores were highest during the spring 2021-22 and fall 2022-23 scores. These features follow the same trend as the Emotional Support domain. As with the Emotional Support domain scores, while these scores vary slightly more than the Emotional Support Domain, these average scores stay relatively stable across time and on par with the national average for Head Start Programs (5.78) (ELCK, 2021) and well-above scores Teachstone asserts the scores that predict child outcomes (5.0) (Teachstone, 2022). Children in classrooms that demonstrate strong classroom organization scores are better able to control their self-regulatory skills, spend less time off-task, and demonstrate stronger early writing and reading scores in elementary school.

Figure 4: CLASS Classroom Organization Domain Scores



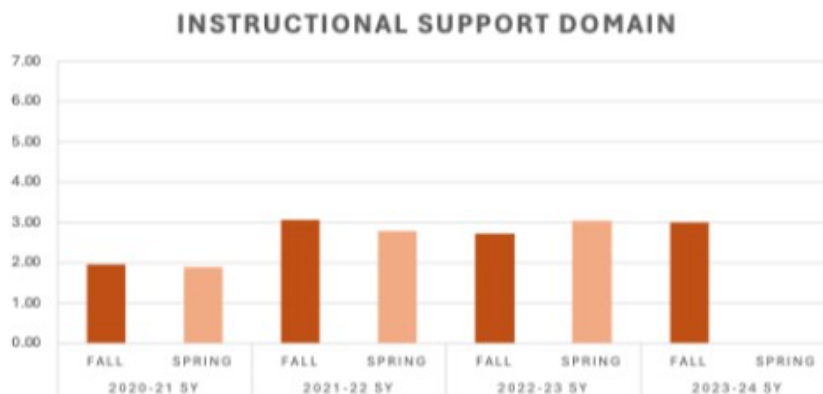
Figure 5 shows average Instructional Support domain scores over time. In addition, these scores varied more than either of the other two domains. Specifically, these Instructional Support scores ranged from slightly under 2 to slightly over 3 (i.e., 1.89 to 3.06). In addition, Instructional Support scores peak at a different time than the other two domains. Specifically, while scores are lowest during ASPIRE’s first year, the highest scores were in the fall of 2021-22. Indeed, the average Instructional Support scores gained almost 1 point from the lowest average in the spring of the 2020-21 school year to the highest in the fall of the 2021-22 school year. Note that the average Instructional Support scores hover near 3 points for the rest of the period. These scores are above the national trend for this domain. In fact, when comparing ASPIRE educators’ scores with the national averages, participants score well-above the national average for Head Start programs of 2.94 and close to the score of 3.25 shown to facilitate higher-order thinking and are of particular importance to closing the achievement gap.

Table 2 shows only three returning participants from the spring of 2020-21 to the fall of 2021-22 out of the 25 participants with CLASS scores. This suggests that the large increase in average Instructional Support scores did not result from increased instructional support skills among participants over time. Instead, the increase in scores might be due to a programmatic change, such as how participants were selected, which might have resulted in higher instructional skills of incoming participants. Furthermore, some of these data, particularly beginning in 2022-23, represented the funded program participants only, whereas earlier data included educators in both the funded and

unfunded programs. Participants in funded programs tended to come in with higher levels of education than those in the unfunded group.

Further analysis of these data is warranted. Regardless, the data do show a roughly 1-point gap closure between average Instructional Support scores and the other two domains over time.

Figure 5: CLASS Instructional Support Domain Scores



To assess average score changes within school years, we looked at how participants' domain scores change each school year. Figure 6 shows the change in a participant's domain score, averaged across all other participants' scores in the same domain and school year. Similar figures at the dimension level can be found in Appendix C (Figures 7-12). Figure 6 shows that all average changes across the three school years are relatively modest, although this figure demonstrates more change than the earlier graphs might have suggested. Specifically, changes in scores range from no change in Classroom Organization dimension scores during the 2020-21 school year to an average increase of 0.58 points in Emotional Support during the 2021-22 school year. One explanation of the sharp rise between 2020-21 and 2021-22 is the change in educational requirements, where the group was divided into funded (Pre-K) and unfunded (Pre-K prep). Another explanation may be the change from virtual program implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic to in-person delivery.

Figure 6: Change in Participants' CLASS Scores for all Domains



Interestingly, the changes in scores across the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years move in opposite directions. That is, participants' scores increased on average in the Emotional Support (0.58 points) and Classroom Organization (0.38 points) domains during the second year of ASPIRE, while participants' scores in Instructional Support decreased by less than a sixth of a point (-0.13). In contrast, in the 2022-23 school year, Emotional Support and Classroom Organization scores decreased (-0.18 and -0.32 points, respectively), while Instructional Support scores increased by roughly a third of a point (0.35). These changes are not significant and are aligned with the relatively stable scores seen in earlier figures. In addition, they further emphasized how closely aligned Emotional Support and Classroom Organization scores appear to be. In addition, the changes in scores provided evidence of participant improvement during the second and third years of ASPIRE in at least one of the domains, with each domain showing improvement in at least one year. Interestingly, improvement in a domain was coupled with a decrease in the scores in at least one of the other domains.

However, it is important to understand that, despite the decline in Emotional Support and Classroom Organization, the scores continue to remain *above* the threshold (score of 5.0 in each domain) proven to impact child outcomes.

Also, based on these data, there was almost no change in scores in any of the three domains during the 2020-21 school year. However, all scores have greater changes during the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years. This improvement coincided with the ASPIRE increasing the number of coaches serving educators, the number of coaching connections each provider had, and a program shift from virtual to in-person coaching, which strongly suggested to the research team that high-touch, in-person coaching was most likely to benefit interactions in FCC homes.

Conclusions Related to CLASS Evaluation. Average dimension scores across time provided evidence that participants were strongest in the Emotional Support domain throughout the ASPIRE program. These scores were close to 6 points on a 7-point scale throughout all years of the program. The Classroom Organizational domain scores were also strong, although slightly lower, ranging from 5 to 6 points on a 7-point scale. In addition to their magnitude, these scores tended to have similar trends, such as the timing of their peaks.

The Instructional Support domain scores stood in contrast to the other dimension scores. Instructional Support domain scores were consistently lower, and these scores varied more than average scores in the other two domains. In addition, there was a 1-point increase in these scores that was not easily understood solely using this data. The analysis of average participant differences highlights another contrast between the Emotional Support and Classroom Organization compared to the Instructional Support Domain scores. Specifically, the scores moved in opposite directions during the second and third years of the study, with Emotional Support and Classroom Organization scores rising in the second year and decreasing in the third. However, Instructional Support scores decreased in the second year and increased in the third.

We caution against drawing strong conclusions from this descriptive analysis based on several instances of missing data. However, the data provided some evidence of similarities between the Emotional Support and Classroom Organization dimensions and more differences in the Instructional Support dimension. In addition, these movements in all dimension scores do provide some evidence of participant improvement during the second and third years of ASPIRE. This may be significant in that the second and third years of the program involved several changes that could account for the increases. In the second year, there were degreed educators in the cohort, and the coaching methodology became more organized. Also, there were more coaches relative to the number of educators and thus higher frequency and duration of coaching for each participant, as well as in-person coaching as the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions waned. These tentative findings echoed literature suggesting that CLASS scores improve more when coaching dosage is higher (Moreno et al., 2015).

In addition to the quantitative results of these assessments described above, we analyzed the ways in which educators discussed their experiences using the CLASS tool and how coaches explained their approach to helping educators learn through these assessments. We found three ways in which the use of these assessments appeared to improve educators' competence in this area of practice: (i) assessing, reflecting, and engaging in feedback discussions; (ii) focusing on open-ended questions; and (iii) learning from modeling.

ASPIRE educators and coaches engaged in discussions about the CLASS assessment processes and results. One provider explained the process:

We are required to do the CLASS observations so my coach will come in and make observations. And then we've been working on the areas of the CLASS assessment that I maybe didn't score as high...So, that would be my goal. And she would say, you know, "I'm going to do observations. And I noticed this, but could you do this..." My coach used different ways of trying to help me in those areas and improve things as a whole.

Coaches discussed these experiences and emphasized that helping educators improve interactions in their FCC programs could help the children they serve in the long term. One coach described it as a mission to use instructional coaching to "close achievement gaps among children and that you might find elsewhere if those quality interactions weren't being invested in."

One practice that educators and coaches both emphasized was asking open-ended questions to prompt children's thinking, vocabulary development, and back-and-forth conversation. An ASPIRE provider explained the practice involved "focusing on the conversations that you have with the kids, making a conversation one of your biggest tools to extending learning with the kids. Not to ask them simple yes or no questions." Multiple ASPIRE educators that we interviewed expressed how challenging it was for them to learn this conversational teaching strategy because it was different than what they were used to. One participant explained this perspective at length:

I really had a hard time with the open-ended questions. I was, again, old school, so I would be like, you know, this is the way it is and there's no other. And I always just wanted the answer. Do you know this? And we moved on. And so now I've learned to adjust all my questions, all my open-ended questions, trying to get them to delve further into their answers, into the vocabulary and to, you know, just really thinking about what the answer is.

ASPIRE participants discussed having learned this primarily through watching their coaches model the practice. Learning how to ask open-ended questions helped educators learn how to differentiate their teaching and improve the quality of interactions they had, especially when they coupled this practice with curriculum-focused discussions within the context of the learning centers in their environment.

Recommendations Related to Question 3. Based on analysis of ASPIRE program data and participant interviews, we identified the following recommendations:

- 3.1 Consider how best to create messaging and options for current and new ASPIRE participants about new eligibility requirements to be a Pre-K eligible educator. In the past Pre-K certification was required, and that was a gatekeeper to the program. Now that certification is not required, educators will be looking for clear information about what they now must do to become a Pre-K eligible provider.
- 3.2 As new participants enter the program, explore how current and past participants' perspectives could be gathered and organized in a systematic way to develop novel

onboarding tools and support resources to meet the needs of the growing program. Interviews with educators revealed the depth of their insight and earnestness of their interest in helping others. As the program grows, these individuals may be best positioned to assist, for compensation, in the development of communications, tools, and resources to assist future ASPIRE participants. A systematic and deliberate approach to gathering and acting upon participants' perspectives could greatly ease organizational growing pains over time.

Question 4 – How do program participants and partners experience the ASPIRE Program?

In addition to understanding the ways in which the ASPIRE program was impacting participants and helping them improve quality and earn Pre-K certification, this evaluation also explored partners' experience of being involved in the program.

Program Participants' Experiences. Interviewees discussed (a) how they decided to be involved, (b) the professional learning community they have come to know, and (c) whether and why they plan to continue their involvement.

Deciding to Join. ASPIRE educators explained that they found out about the program through the MSDE's Tuesday Tidbits newsletter, through ECE conferences, Facebook, and from other educators. Each had their own reason for joining, but their experiences reflected common themes. Some wanted to be able to access the subsidies so that they could be more inclusive in who they served. As one put it:

Well, for a long time, I would always say that I would do what I do for free if I could. And ASPIRE gives me a means to be able to give my parents a good education for their kids, but it doesn't cost them. So, I like being able to give them that option, and I can still take care of my family needs. It's a good win-win on both sides if you ask me.

The funded slots have also helped educators in less affluent areas of the state make ends meet:

It was not a decision that we made lightly nor overnight, but the cost of running this business, it has increased greatly from 2020. So, we've had four grant-funded students this year, and it has helped with the cost of operation. And we're hoping to expand each year. And it has been, if you ask the parents of the four students that were serving like life-changing for these parents.

Many educators joined because they saw it as a chance to become better at offering high-quality and effective FCC programs. One educator stated simply, "I just really wanted to take my program to the next level." Another reason ASPIRE participants got involved was to earn Pre-K certification with the program's support. Several educators had degrees in other fields and a passion for teaching but just needed an opportunity to get guidance, encouragement, and some financial support to get an education certification. Two educators who had certification to teach in the school system but preferred to run their own program from home saw ASPIRE as an opportunity to use their teaching

degree in a way that best suited their interests. Many educators we spoke with explained that they were motivated to join because of all the encouragement and support they perceived in the programs' design. As one provider remarked, "When I found out about all the other amazing things that ASPIRE offers in addition to writing the MSDE grant, it was a no-brainer to want to be a part of the organization." One participant explained that she needed pedagogical support as well as professional connection:

I appreciated the fact that they said that there would be a coach and there would be other educators to work with. I think just starting off with this business, I was told that it could be a little isolating because you're the only provider and you were (with) the children all day. So, there's not like a network setup. So, the ASPIRE program offers a network of educators to collaborate with and learn from and grow with.

Professional Learning Community. For participants that we interviewed, the ASPIRE program represented a professional learning opportunity that led to career advancement, served the community, and made them more effective as educators. But the program also provided them with connections to other educators through a professional learning community that, for many, provided a connection they had been needed for a long time. As one provider simply said, "What I like best is the collaboration and friendships that happen with the cohorts." Through our review of program documents and conversations with educators and coaches, we found that the professional learning community that has evolved through the ASPIRE program focused on (i) building relationships and (ii) sharing valuable practices with one another.

Building Relationship and Connection. Providing family childcare can be isolating work. Often, educators work long hours as the only staff. The lack of daily professional connections and lack of free time to pursue connections outside of work can be detrimental to educators' well-being. In the ASPIRE program, participants met other educators through training experiences and social media connections. Coaches often facilitate these networks and use them to share information, expand on practices, and create space for educators to learn from one another. One provider said, "I'm not living in a box anymore, just with my group of people that I see on a daily basis. It's just so much more. It's like the box has been opened and I'm pleased."

Sharing Valuable Practices. These connections have created opportunities for ASPIRE educators to teach and learn with one another:

Normally, we wouldn't get an opportunity to share amongst each other just in an isolated situation. For almost 30 years, I've been doing this. And the last three, it's been like, oh my goodness, there's other people out there?! Somebody like myself? We can kind of get together, even if it's virtually, to share ideas and give support to one another. And I think it's been great. I'm loving it.

Through shared text threads, meet-ups, potlucks, and other interactions, ASPIRE educators have been able to share their challenges candidly with individuals they trust who know something about their experiences. For example, one provider described:

I had a problem with a kid. I just couldn't get this kid to learn how to move around the environment safely. [I asked the group] and everybody would chime in and kind of give advice. And you know what? I thought, let me try it instead of from a book point of view, it gives a personal type learning experience and that's a lot. If I'm teaching about something that's not familiar, then I go to the group, "Hey, anyone has any ideas about that?" I didn't have that before ASPIRE.

With coaches monitoring and facilitating these interactions, ASPIRE program leaders have been confident that these interactions are helping educators move forward in alignment with the programs' goals. Coaches have intentionally created this professional learning network, with one coach explaining, "We're really trying to build a safe space for them to learn and grow." Coaches explained that the key practices they have used involve encouraging educators to share what they are doing with one another. Gradually, they become comfortable sharing their challenges too, and at that point, they open possibilities to learn from each other that would not have been possible without the program. One coach explained:

They also get real solutions, practical solutions, tried and tested solutions. Because oftentimes, even if we tell them as coaches, sometimes when they hear it from another educator, it just hits a little differently or it resonates a little bit more easily than even if the delivery is similar, it can be very helpful to have that peer support.

Retention in the Program. Since its pilot year, 2020-21, 88 FCC educators have participated in the ASPIRE PreK program, and 67 are still actively participating. The largest decline occurred after the program's first year, largely due to changes in MSDE policies. During that pilot year, MSDE waived the requirement of a four-year degree for participation in publicly funded Pre-K but reinstated the requirement for the 2021-22 school year. As a result, 12 of the educators in the original cohort of 15 left the program as they did not have four-year degrees and had no desire to obtain one at that time. Two of the educators in the original cohort did have degrees and elected to return for the 2021-22 school year and received state funding. One of the original cohorts, without a degree, elected to stay on, without funding, and join a newly created cohort for educators on a degree track but not yet eligible for state funding. Since 2021, the program has experienced an attrition rate of 11.7% due to a wide variety of reasons, including closing businesses, lost housing, the inability to attract eligible children, and the educator realizing that they did not want to teach Pre-K.

We discussed whether and why ASPIRE participants expected that they would continue in the program. Three salient themes emerged from these conversations: (i) educators emphatic support of the ASPIRE program, (ii) the affirming experiences they have had, and (iii) the sentiment that although they could apply for the MSDE Pre-K grant on their own, going-it-alone would be difficult.

Emphatic Support Among Participants. Although we interviewed only 30% of ASPIRE participants, all of whom were in the funded program, we heard unanimous and enthusiastic reviews from those we spoke with. Asked whether they planned to continue in the ASPIRE program they responded: "Definitely!;" "I'm staying until they kick me out;" "I told them, just try and get rid of me;" and "This is my family." When asked to comment on her perception of whether and why ASPIRE educators may stay, an ASPIRE staff member explained simply, "Why would you want to leave something that has been so beneficial?" However, she also explained that for the program to

grow, more mentors and coaches would be needed, and veteran ASPIRE educators could make exceptional coaches.

ASPIRE Affirms Educators. One salient theme describing why educators wished to stay in the program was the consistent affirmation that the program had given them. Being treated as professionals and engaging with others has made them feel more professional and enhanced the value they see in their own work. Put simply by one provider, “We feel valued.” Having opportunities to engage with other FCC educators has reminded them that they are not isolated “babysitters.” They are each an important part of a statewide ECE system that needs them, and they have valuable insights to share with others:

The idea of being able to not just get help, but in ways that I can help others... So, I can be a mentor and give peer support, and it's nice for me personally, to help other people. I get to do something that makes me feel good.

Going it Alone Can be Risky. Pre-K grants were available to FCC educators in Maryland, regardless of whether they participated in the ASPIRE program. However, writing and administrating one's own grant is challenging technically and in terms of the time it takes to learn and monitor. Beyond the coaching, technical assistance, and financial support described above, ASPIRE acted as the intermediary between educators and the MSDE. This role encompassed grant application, managing the reimbursement for subsidized child care slots, and other technical and financial supports. The support ASPIRE provided was meaningful for educators. For example, MSDE operates on a reimbursement basis for child care slots and can take more than one month to repay. This can put FCC educators, who often live on tight economic margins, at some financial risk. At the system level, there may also be some risk. The mixed-delivery system emphasized in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future (MSDE, 2024) emphasized that ECE programs set within child care centers, school districts, or family homes can all be high-quality and worthy of the investment of the public's trust and funding. However, these environments are not equal in key dimensions that may impact quality. For example, in school buildings and child care centers there are teams of individual educators and administrators supporting the ECE workforce, and there are professional development resources and requirements as well as regular checks on quality. However, in an FCC context, a provider applying alone for the Pre-K grant would not be guaranteed the same kinds of professional support nor the same oversight elements as educators in schools or centers. Educators we spoke with were aware they could apply by themselves, but none wanted to give up the program to do more work with less support. One provider expressed:

There's no way I could do the job without ASPIRE and implement a productive, valuable Pre-K program without having the support. It would be too impossible to do just on my own out there.

Working with Partners. We conducted five partner interviews. Though we did not speak with many system partners, those we heard from recounted beneficial and supportive interactions with the ASPIRE team – interactions, they said, that advanced their shared work to implement Pillar 1 of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The partners we interviewed worked with an FCC professional association, an ECE-focused non-profit organization, and at local education agencies (LEA). In these roles, participants had regular, collaborative interactions with ASPIRE's leaders. One partner we spoke with also had intermittent interactions with ASPIRE coaches and providers.

How ASPIRE Connects with Partners. We found that ASPIRE leaders were well-connected with partners through ECE system meetings, more informal professional network building, and through their work with providers. Several system partners described collaborating with ASPIRE leaders in the State Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) meetings and other collaborative venues. All five participants appreciated their collaborative partnership with ASPIRE program leaders in these meetings. In addition to formal ECE meetings, participants discussed ASPIRE program leaders as part of their ECE professional network. Some explained that ASPIRE leaders had contacted them to introduce themselves and explain the program. Others heard about the program and reached out to its leaders. Of this network building, one partner said, “We meet to talk through stuff, we invite them to all to work we do where there is a direct overlap, which I think is a good thing because it means we're not duplicating services.”

Participants also explained the connections they had with ASPIRE personnel through email exchanges, in schools, and in FCC homes. They described counting on the ASPIRE team to be watchful of legislative and agency policy changes that would impact the ECE system and FCC providers. One partner expressed her appreciation, “They are so knowledgeable. They follow all the legislative changes. I just try to keep up with it all. They will email me resources, and that helps.” An LEA administrator said she was grateful to meet ASPIRE coaches and visit the ASPIRE FCC educators in her area. This connection allowed her to feel confident recommending ASPIRE Pre-K homes for the children of families she serves. She said:

We've been really trying to share when families call asking about 3-year-old care. Our administrative assistant actually has the ASPIRE providers' phone numbers and recommends to the parents that they call them and see if they have any openings.

In addition to connections with ASPIRE leaders and providers, one participant recounted the beneficial engagement she experienced when an ASPIRE coach came and presented to their team about the program. It was important for the system partners we interviewed to have a relationship with the ASPIRE program leaders and understand how they help FCC providers create high-quality programs. One explained that she visited ASPIRE FCC programs because she wanted to know first-hand the kinds of FCC programs that ASPIRE participants ran. She remembered visiting two FCC homes, one that she had seen before the ASPIRE program. She said:

Both sites were awesome. The one [I had seen] was even better than it was before. It's got a very homey feel to it, but they have the learning centers, they have student work displayed, they have calm-down areas. They literally try to take everything that we're having in our Pre-Ks to the in-home childcare.

Partners are Looking Forward to ASPIRE's Future. We asked the partners to describe how they imagined continuing to work with the ASPIRE program. Each was eager to continue being “innovation partners” building a better ECE system. Several also detailed specific ways they hoped to continue their collaboration. One expressed that she would like to co-develop professional learning opportunities that could be shared between school-based and home-based early childhood educators. Another said that she recognized the ASPIRE team as FCC experts, and she wanted to “pick their brain about how to partner on FCC supports.” An LEA administrator hoped to collaborate on curriculum to support students' transitions from their FCC programs into local schools as they aged. Despite their

varied interests in the type of collaboration, they unanimously expressed their “hope that they continue to expand their work,” “get more providers involved,” and “keep building.” One experienced ECE system partner explained that although, in her experience, the continuation of any ECE system program could not be guaranteed, the critical issues that ASPIRE addresses were certain to continue:

I would like to see them continue to be able to offer a reliable, ongoing program that folks can rely on. In the child care system, so many things come in and disappear quickly. It is very difficult to bank on new programs because the funding comes in and then it is gone. If a mixed-delivery system is going to work, it needs to be supported. Think of FCC program turnover, we need to replace the ones that are leaving.

Recommendations Related to Question 4. Based on our analysis of interviews with ASPIRE educators, leaders, coaches, and partners, we suggest the following recommendations:

- 4.1 Explore how to use the themes regarding why educators joined the program to develop messages to disseminate through the above channels.
- 4.2 Continue the strong work of building a professional learning community and continue to develop consistency, creativity, and reliability among the supports offered by the coaches, including new coaches. Educators explained that in the process of communicating about their professional practices, they also benefited in terms of their well-being. Noting the extreme challenge of the FCC provider role and how taxing it can be for one's well-being, consider how and in what ways it may be appropriate to open dialogues and provide resources that directly help educators to support their own well-being. For example, ways to maintain healthy activity levels, manage stress, emphasize self-care, and be resilient against the secondary trauma that can be involved in supporting families in the greatest need.
- 4.3 Although participating in ASPIRE is not required to secure an MSDE Pre-K grant, educators we spoke with thought going it alone would be risky. Given that the program no longer will require Pre-K certification, consider what culminating options, or experiences the ASPIRE program may lead to. Although educators enjoy the experience and many do not want to transition out of the program, consider how they might be able to transition into another form of program engagement, such as a mentor, a coach, or a journey worker in the FCCAMD's registered apprenticeship program.
- 4.4 ASPIRE program leaders are well-connected with the ECE system. They are knowledgeable and collaborative partners who serve a critical role in supporting FCC providers to build high-quality programs as part of Maryland's ECE mixed-delivery system. We encourage their continued work in collaboration with their system partners.

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Appendix A

Documents Reviewed

Document / Resource	Description
ASPIRE website	The web resource provides information about ASPIRE targeted toward both parents and educators interested in exploring the program.
ASPIRE Overview	The document describes the ASPIRE program’s development, goals, and strategies.
Classroom Assessment and Scoring System scores for ASPIRE educators 2020–2024	The spreadsheets provide CLASS scores for participating educators. Though not a complete data set, the spreadsheets provide pre-coaching assessments each fall and post-coaching assessment data each spring for participating educators.
Instructional Quality Review (IQR) assessment reports 2021-2024	These documents include results of IQR observational assessments conducted by MSDE personnel in the home programs of ASPIRE participants.
ASPIRE Educator Demographic Surveys	Spreadsheets provide demographic information about ASPIRE participants.
ASPIRE Educator Satisfaction Surveys	Spreadsheets provide information about ASPIRE participants’ satisfaction with the program.
Coaching Fidelity Manual	The internal document articulates the ASPIRE programs’ approach to instructional coaching for participating educators.
Instructional coach position description	The job description explains the roles, responsibilities, and qualifications of ASPIRE coaches.
ASPIRE coaches’ resumes	Resumes submitted by prospective coaches upon application to the ASPIRE program.

Appendix B

Codes for Qualitative Analysis of Interviews

Code	Definition
ASPIRE program evolution	This group of codes focused on how the ASPIRE program changed over time from the perspectives of interview participants.
Target population to support	Descriptions of the “who” the program was designed to serve, as well as whether and how the target group has/has not changed.
Responding to policy	Inception and subsequent changes related to changes in state or local policy.
What to change about ASPIRE	Thoughts or guidance from participants about what could / should change about the ASPIRE program.
What not to change about ASPIRE	Thoughts or guidance from participants about what about the ASPIRE program should be continued.
Advancing provider’s competency	This group of codes focused on how educators improved their ability to provide high-quality family child care programs.
Intended impacts	Defined aims for advancing educators' competency.
Observed or measured impacts	Examples and evidence of advancing Educators’ competency.
Improving the FCC programs’ environments	Examples and evidence of changes made that improve the physical environment in the childcare program.
Additional advancements	Additional examples of competency development described by interview participants.
Coaching	This group of codes focused on interview participants’ perspectives and experiences with the ASPIRE coaching program.
Coaches	Specific support activities, features, or outcomes related to coaching services.
Coaching program strengths	Observed and described strengths of the coaching program.
Coaching program weaknesses	Observed and described weaknesses of the coaching program.
Coaching program evolution	Perspectives on how the coaching program could change or has changed.
Additional perspectives on coaching	Thoughts on the coaching program outside of those of coaches and program strengths and weaknesses.

Appendix B (cont.)

Codes for Qualitative Analysis of Interviews

Code	Definition
Specific Supports	This group of codes included descriptions of the specific types of support that ASPIRE provided participants, as described interview participants.
Administrative guidance/TA support	Specific supports afforded to participants that help them navigate and/or advantage from administrative requirements or provisions
Substitutes	Specific support related to substitute reimbursement.
Family communication	Description of any guidance, tools, resources, or materials provided by the program about communicating and collaborating with families.
Curriculum	Specific supports related to the provision of and guidance on the Creative Curriculum
Professional learning community	Description of experiences and attitudes about being in a cohort supported by the ASPIRE program.
Other training and supplies	Description of additional training or supplies provided to ASPIRE participants.
Funded slots for children in ASPIRE participants FCC programs	Description of the grant-funded slots for children in the program.
Participants' career advancement	This group of codes included examples of career advancement available to ASPIRE participants.
Retention in the ASPIRE program	Indications, examples, and descriptions of individuals staying or leaving the program
Pre-K certification	Indications, examples, and descriptions of individuals making steps toward (or achieving) Pre-K certification.
Instructional quality	Description of whether and how the participants' ability to provide high-quality instruction.
Growing as an educator	Descriptions of how ASPIRE participants saw growth in themselves as educators.
Equity and access	Instances in which issues of either equity, access, or both are present in the participants' comments.

Appendix B (cont.)

Codes for Qualitative Analysis of Interviews

Experience with the ASPIRE program	This group of codes included perspectives from interview participants about why they decided to be involved in the program in whatever capacity.
Deciding to be involved	Descriptions of hearing about, opting in, and engaging with the ASPIRE program
Coaching program strengths	Descriptions of the coaching program's strengths.
Coaching program weaknesses	Descriptions of concerns educators have had either as they decided to join, after they were in, or otherwise.

TA = technical assistance

Appendix C

CLASS Figures 7-9 show all participants' average scores in each period.

Figure 7: CLASS Emotional Support Dimension Scores

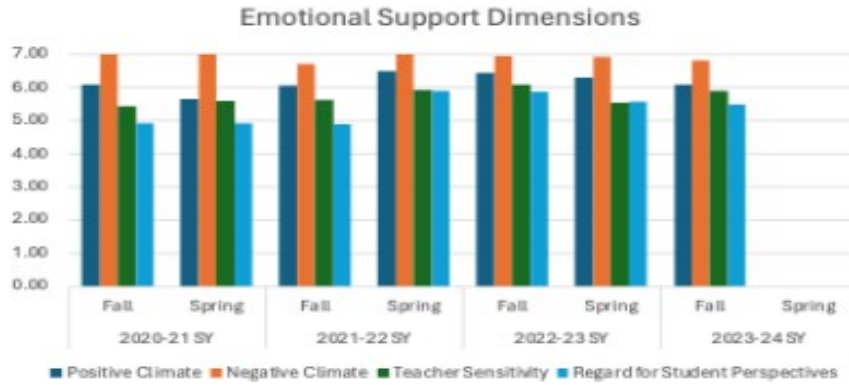


Figure 8: CLASS Classroom Organization Dimension Scores

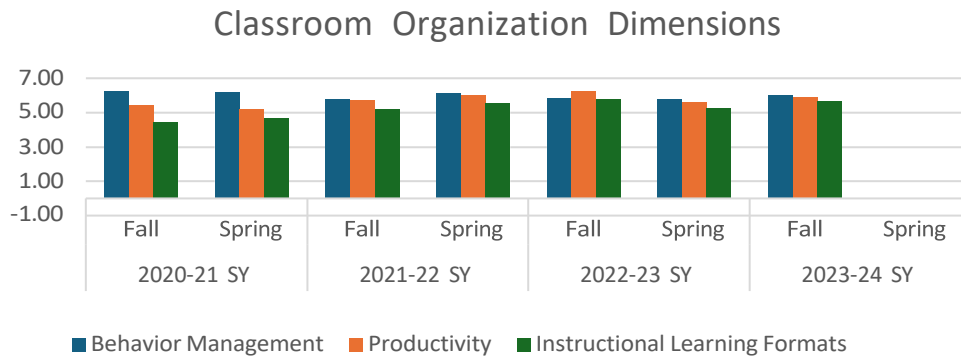
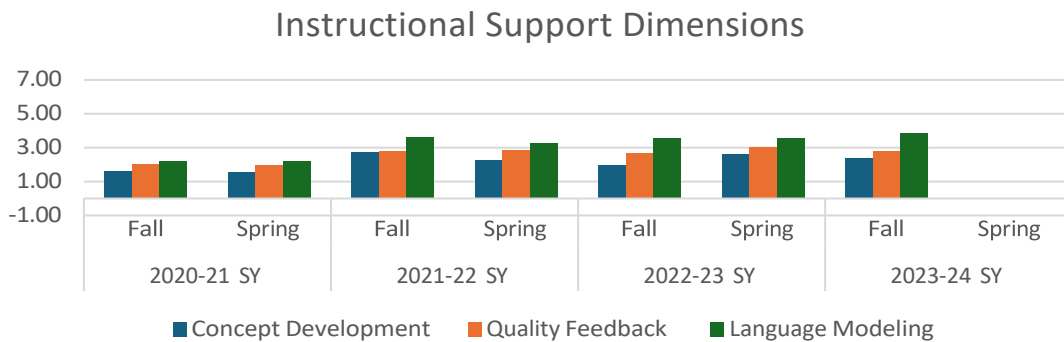


Figure 9: CLASS Instructional Support Dimension Scores



Appendix C (cont.)

CLASS Figures 10-12 show the average difference in participant dimension scores within each school year.

Figure 10: Average Difference in CLASS Emotional Support Dimension Scores

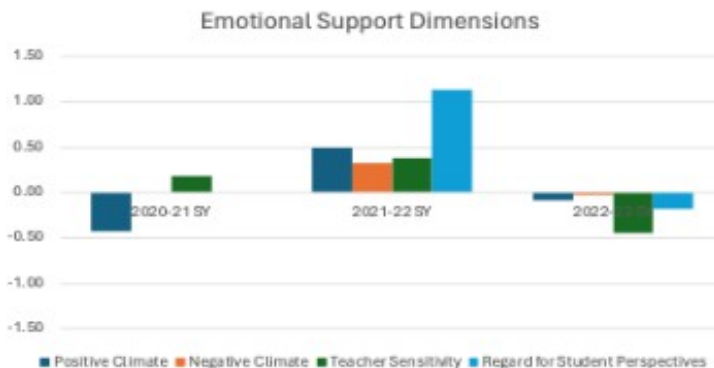


Figure 11: Average Difference in CLASS Classroom Organization Dimension Scores



Figure 12: Average Difference in CLASS Instructional Support Dimension Scores

