



**Play Centers, Inc.**

**2414 E. Joppa Road Parkville, MD 21234**

**(410) 296-4880**

[playcenters@playcenters.org](mailto:playcenters@playcenters.org)

Play Centers, Inc. is a private, not-for-profit child care provider meeting the early care and education needs of families of more than 300 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in our full-day programs located in Baltimore County, Baltimore City, and Anne Arundel County as well as families of more than 800 elementary and middle-school children in before and after school programs located in public and parochial schools throughout Baltimore County. Our programs have been in operation since 1982 and currently employ more than 200 child care professionals and educators. Throughout our program design is a strong emphasis on guided learning through play as a pathway toward enriched and enhanced learning outcomes. Our programs are licensed by the Maryland State Department of Education – Office of Child Care (MSDE-OCC) and we are proud to participate in the various MSDE-OCC and MSDE-endorsed quality initiatives, including Staff Credentialing, Program Accreditation, Maryland EXCELS, Environmental Rating Scales, and more.

February 3, 2021

Position: Supports HB 597

Ways and Means Committee

After School Programs in Maryland keep children safe during out-of-school hours, create dynamic learning environments, and provide working parents with the knowledge that their children are safe and secure, growing and learning and developing in healthy, enriching, and productive ways.

When before and after school programs cannot operate at their full capacity, when group sizes have to be limited due to the COVI 19 pandemic as well as in response to insufficient staffing and sluggish or non-existent staffing qualification verification and variance processes, school age children do not have the opportunity to participate in high quality programs, and, instead, they are home alone before and after school. Sometimes this means that school-age children may not deliver themselves to school, may fail to complete homework, may experience an increase in childhood obesity, may experience increases in accidents in the home, participation in juvenile crime, and other risk-taking activities.

Additionally, there are direct and significant impacts on parents and their well-being, employers and workplace productivity, and, ultimately, the economics of the state. When I entered the field of before and after school care in 1982, as an employee of Play Centers, Inc., a private, non-profit child care company with programs in Baltimore County, Baltimore City, and Anne Arundel County, we were interviewing 5 candidates for every child care teacher position. Today, we are more likely to interview 1 candidate for every 5 positions. When there are no teachers and support staff, we have no choice but to close classrooms and to turn children and families away, even though there is availability of space for care – space, but an insufficient number of teachers.

Over the past five years, we have experienced a shocking decline in the number of professional, educated, committed individuals interested in working in this field. At that same time, the number of families needing access to and participating in high quality before and after school programs continues to rise. The projections are that job openings in early childhood and school-age programs will continue to grow at a rapid pace and we need to act now to establish conditions that will bring a sufficient number of child care professionals back into the field in order to meet these needs. In addition to the ever-increasing critical workforce shortage, there continues to be increasing turn-around times by our regulatory agency regarding staff qualification assessments and the approval process of staffing variances. Although this delay varies from Region to Region and from Licensing Specialist to Licensing Specialist, my experience has been that this process is consistently slower than ever before, with some qualification assessments taking weeks and others taking months.

However, we are hopeful that a side effect of House Bill 597 will be that these clear and defined alternate pathways will facilitate the ability to expand the employment pool, hire more expediently and not be negatively impacted by time sensitive staff qualification assessments by our regulatory agency.

Although no single bill will resolve all of the factors contributing to the current child care workforce crisis, House Bill 597 will create a real and recognizable first step on which we may build future steps. We ask that you support our ability to operate the highest quality programs, with open classrooms that are fully staffed with qualified and committed teachers, by providing a favorable report for House Bill 597.