



Anny Gonzalez

Owner-operator of Casa MAKV Montessori
in Germantown, Maryland.

Maryland Can't Work Without Her

Compared to the other Montessori programs in my community, I am charging 50% less, which makes it affordable for more parents but not sustainable for me. And that's what universal pre-K is supposed to offer: excellent education for ALL children. I think that everybody deserves access to high-quality education, but not at the expense of early educators' well-being.

Then, during the pandemic, when the school where I was working shut down, and I was home with my own five children, a neighbor asked me if I could take care of her child as well. Very soon, I had a little group in my living room and more people were asking if I could take care of their kids.

So, I got busy learning how to navigate the system and get licensed as a family child care provider. I found out that with my bachelor's in early childhood education and my experience, I had all the credentials I needed. The hardest part was finding out exactly what was required to bring my house and property into compliance with the safety regulations. I made a lot of phone calls, and I didn't always get the same answers, or sometimes I just got referred to another department. I also had to make an emergency plan and take some training specifically for family child care providers. All in all, it took me about eight months to prepare my home and myself to meet all the regulations.

Now I've been operating my business for about five years. I'm licensed to serve seven, plus my own 2-year-old daughter. We are a very diverse group: Asian, African-American, white, Spanish speaking, and English speaking. Montessori is often thought of as a kind of elite education, but five of the children receive the Maryland subsidy for universal pre-K, which makes my program affordable to all.

The pre-K subsidy of \$66.60 per day is for six and a half hours, but I actually have the kids for up to 10 hours a day, so this is one way that I'm eating the cost of care. The pre-K reimbursement rate was actually reduced this year (from \$72.22 per day) and they used to reimburse us for some materials we purchased, but that has been cut from the program. A lot of home-based providers have stopped participating in pre-K because of these cuts, but the families I have cannot afford to pay for additional child care after just a part-time preschool program, so I am keeping the program. I know that the children who come to Casa MAKV are well-prepared for

school and will succeed because of the early education I provide.

I call my school Casa MAKV. Casa because we are a bilingual program, and “casa” means house in Spanish. MAKV are the first initials of my daughters’ names. They also stand for Motivation, Aptitude, Kreativity, and Values, which are qualities we nurture every day in our students. We spend time outside every day, we do many creative art activities, children have a lot of freedom and independence, but we also follow a Montessori curriculum with lessons each day. Then, in the afternoon, while children are resting, I take notes about their learning and progress and collect data using a tool called GOLD to evaluate, assess, and monitor children’s progress, which is also part of the Montessori method. At the end of the day, we have music, movement, and more outside time. It’s a very full day for the kids and for me, from 7:30-5:30 by the time the last one is picked up.

The Maryland intermediary responsible for supporting contracted pre-K providers has gone above and beyond to support educators like me so that we can provide high-quality early childhood education. For example, I receive coaching and two observations a year where I am evaluated by the same criteria as a certified teacher. Unfortunately, that does not come with the same compensation that public school preschool teachers receive. Also, the standards by which we are evaluated are designed for public school center settings, not for a home where children are in mixed-aged groups.

In my program, every child is at a different stage and I have to provide for all of them. I plan activities for my pre-K students according to those standards, but I also plan activities for my 2-year olds and appropriate care for an infant. In a public school setting, they also have specialists who come in to address special needs and English language learners. I am the only specialist in my program. That’s why I

think the policies and standards for family child care should be tailored to mixed ages and a home setting. They should recognize the value of mixed ages, a smaller group, and the skills a caregiver has to meet those needs.

The funding formula is also problematic because the pre-K school year is only 180 days. When parents have to pay for the additional two months out of their own pocket, many just rely on grandparents or one of the parents has to stay home so the other one can go to work. This means I can’t rely on a steady income in the summer.

I also don’t have benefits, so I have to purchase my own health insurance, as well as insurance for my program and other bills. I really don’t want to give up home-based care because it’s a good feeling when the child who started with me four years ago has a baby sister and I can care for her, too. I love these families and they love the smaller setting of a family home. But I also have a business to run and the business model is not sustainable.

So I am advocating for policymakers to see how family child care is a different setting than school-based preschool and that requires different policies and compensation. Compared to other Montessori programs in my community, I am charging 50% less, which makes it affordable for more parents, but not sustainable for me. And that’s what universal pre-K is supposed to offer: excellent education for ALL children. I think that everybody deserves access to high-quality education, but not at the expense of early educators’ well-being.