Synopsis of MSDE report on:
Early Care and Education Experiences for Children of Hispanic Origin in Maryland (2012)
Available at www.marylandpublicschools.org

Hispanics are the fastest growing and youngest racial/ethnic group in Maryland. The number of Hispanic children as a proportion of all children has been increasing more rapidly than the number of non-Hispanic White and African American children for all age groups. This demographic shift poses critical implications for the present and future of economic and social policy in the state, with particular emphasis on education.

The Challenges
The most recent Maryland Census and Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) data show Hispanic children are underrepresented in early education programs throughout the state. Early education research overwhelmingly supports the importance of the connection between early literacy skills development and later literacy achievement, and the impact of instructional interventions on children’s learning. Given the educational challenges that this population poses, this report recommends that Maryland focuses on the critical period of the early years (birth to 8 years) to address young Hispanic children’s educational needs.

The Intervention
This report also highlights the multifaceted nature of this problem which will require new policies and systems of academic intervention. Hispanic children are not a homogeneous group for they are products of diverse immigration histories as well as socio economic and linguistic profiles. Thus, a variety of approaches need to be considered. Most importantly, we must focus on the youngest segment of this population because we have not gone far enough in documenting their needs, due to the paucity of research on effective interventions.

The Reasons for Action:
There are four very practical reasons why it is entirely appropriate to address the educational challenges of young children of Hispanic origin in Maryland, as well as its policies and research implications:

First, the policy importance of this age group is rooted in the notions of critical periods of intervention and rates of return on investment. In other words, efforts to support historically disadvantaged groups have the biggest payoff when targeted at the young.
Second, we must take into account the Hispanic children’s family socioeconomic status (SES) as a fundamental cause of race/ethnic disparities. Hispanic children are the most socioeconomically disadvantaged group in the U.S. Therefore, when considering interventions, we must also consider economic disadvantage as much as language proficiency for the disparities related to Hispanic status and the importance of how the two are highly conflated.

Third, research in this area needs to keep the focus on the explicit ways that the outcomes of the child generation in this population are tied to the circumstances of the parent generation. In other words, policy recommendations need not concern only interventions targeting children. Instead, we need to think of ways through which improving their parents’ lives may also help the children.

Last but not least, we must consider interventions designed to address two stages of the challenges facing young children of Hispanic origin: one rooted in social demography; the migration process, and another in developmental psychology; the processes of adaptation that newcomer Hispanic youth and their parents undergo once they are here. We have always applied interventions that address only the “arriving here” or the “migration process.” These notions tend to represent a onetime short-term band-aid that overlooks the “adaptation process.” The latter is more complex and requires a greater understanding of how immigrant families with young children adjust to life in the U.S., experience parenting, and learn to navigate the U.S. Early Childhood Care and Education system. If the “adaptation process” is not considered it could undercut our ability to create the most effective programs, studies, and policies that will adequately address and support immigrant families.

Finally, in order for Maryland to establish a world-class education system, it must also take into account the opportunities to explore, develop, and determine effective and scalable strategies to increase school engagement and learning for children of Hispanic origin. As a result, this production of new knowledge and cutting-edge, innovative practices will provide opportunities and continued academic improvement for these children, as well as cement Maryland’s status as a national leader with a World Class Education System.