



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Katy Miller, Communications Coordinator
401-351-9400, Ext. 22 / kmiller@rikidscount.org

**Rhode Island KIDS COUNT releases new Issue Brief:
Improving Access to High-Quality Early Learning Programs
in Rhode Island**

***Increasing access to high-quality early learning programs opportunities
can significantly improve outcomes for children***

Providence, RI (April 29, 2013) – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its newest Issue Brief – ***Improving Access to High-Quality Early Learning Programs in Rhode Island*** – at a policy roundtable attended by policy makers, education leaders, state agencies, and community members. The event was held on Monday, April 29, 2013 from 11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, One Union Station, in Providence. Speakers included Deborah Gist, Commissioner of the Rhode Island Department of Education; Sandra Powell, Director of the Rhode Island Department of Human Services; and Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Senior Policy Analyst Leanne Barrett presented the findings.

The policy forum highlighted key strategies to strengthen Rhode Island’s early learning system for young children, from birth through kindergarten. Speakers at the event emphasized the benefits young children receive from participation in affordable, effective early learning programs prior to kindergarten. Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, noted, “Investments in early learning have proven long-term benefits for children, their families, and our society. We must increase access to high-quality affordable early learning programs, for young children - especially low-income children who lack access to high-quality programs - so they have a solid foundation for learning and achieve positive education outcomes for Rhode Island’s future workforce and economy.”

About 23% of preschoolers in Rhode Island are enrolled in publically-funded early learning programs. Forty-seven percent of all children ages 3-4 in Rhode Island are enrolled in preschool (both publically and privately funded programs).

There are four major public funding streams that support family participation in high-quality early learning programs: child care subsidies for licensed center-based and family-based child care programs; Early Head Start and Head Start programs; State Pre-Kindergarten programs; and early childhood special education, including Early Intervention for children ages birth to three and preschool special education for children ages 3 to kindergarten entry.

“The importance of access to high quality early learning programs cannot be overstated,” said Leanne Barrett, Senior Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Effective early learning programs provide a wide variety of learning opportunities that shape the cognitive, social and emotional development of young children. This can impact the likelihood of success for children throughout their life.”

Participants at the policy roundtable noted that Rhode Island has made progress in improving access to and quality of early learning programs; highlighting the state funded Pre-Kindergarten program. A two-year evaluation of Rhode Island’s State Pre-K program found that it improves children’s language and literacy skills, and closes the achievement gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers by three-quarters. Expansion of the State Pre-K program is included in the state’s education funding formula. Rhode Island’s Pre-K program is one of only five State Pre-K programs in the nation that meet all recommended quality benchmarks. “Rhode Island is making a real commitment to our children and families through the State Pre-K program,” remarked Ms. Bryant. “Children who participate in high-quality early learning programs such as State Pre-K score higher on tests of skills and achievement, are much less likely to drop out of school, repeat grades and enroll in special education.”

One area of concern that will set back access for low-income children to high-quality programs is Head Start, which faces funding cuts due to the federal sequester. Rhode Island stands to lose Head Start slots for approximately 160 low-income children, and some programs will close early. “Rhode Island needs to find a solution to prevent the Head Start classrooms from closing down. We cannot afford having over 160 poor children lose access to Head Start at a time that we need to increase school readiness, and close the preparation gap that exists between poor and more affluent children,” said Bryant.

Recommendations

The Issue Brief offers specific recommendations to improve state policies that lead to an effective high-quality early learning system. Participants in the forum highlighted the critical need to implement the recommendations in order to close the achievement gap that continues to exist when children enter school. “Research shows that without access to effective early learning opportunities, this gap begins by age two and widens as children get older,” stated Ms. Barrett. “While Rhode Island has made progress to expand access, many children still do not have access to high-quality early learning programs in their community.”

Specific recommendations outlined in the Issue Brief include:

Increase and improve access to high-quality child care and early education programs, including:

- Evidence-based home visiting programs for families facing poor educational outcomes,
- Expand state and federal investments in Head Start and Early Head Start,
- Continue the planned expansion of the State Pre-K program as part of the education funding formula and encourage district investment of Title I funds,
- Expand access to high-quality child care for children from infancy through age 12,
- Ensure that infants and toddlers with one or more significant family risk factors for developmental delay can continue to be served by the Early Intervention program,
- Work to increase the percentage of children receiving preschool special education services that are enrolled in inclusive, high-quality preschool settings that meet the needs of their families.

Support Program Quality Improvement, including:

- Require programs who receive CCAP funding to participate in BrightStars, a goal set forth in Rhode Island's Biennial Plan for Child Care,
- Maximize participation in BrightStars, the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System,
- Develop and implement a tiered reimbursement for the Child Care Assistance Program,
- Build the capacity of programs to meet higher quality standards,
- Use T.E.A.C.H. to support educators to complete coursework in child development and early childhood education, and expand efforts to connect increased education to improved compensation,
- Ensure educators in the Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education programs have sufficient training to appropriately determine eligibility and deliver effective special education services for children who are at substantial risk for poor educational outcomes.

###

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.