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Testimony Re: Article 10, Sections 1-4, Regarding Universal Pre-K

Senate Finance Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for Article 10 related to sustaining and expanding the state's high-quality State Pre-K program and improving access to high-quality child care.

Rhode Island Pre-Kindergarten (Sections 1-4)

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT offers its strong and enthusiastic support for the Governor's plan for expansion of the State Pre-K program that is contained in Article 10, Sections 1-4. Rhode Island's State Pre-K Program was ranked number 1 in quality by US News and World Report and is one of just three programs in the nation that meets all ten of the new quality benchmarks by the National Institute for Early Education at Rutgers which produces the Preschool Yearbook that provides a comprehensive look at Pre-K programs in the United States.

High quality early childhood education is one of the most effective ways to break the cycle of poverty and ensure that all children have the opportunity to thrive. Research by Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman has found that the rate of return on investment in early childhood development can be up to 13 percent per child per year, due to improved outcomes in education, health, sociability and economic productivity. The Governor's plan is not only good for children – it is good for Rhode Island's economy and future prosperity.

Kindergarten teachers will tell you that they can tell immediately which of their students have had high quality preschool prior to Kindergarten entry and which have not. The Governor's proposal of expanding high quality Pre-K to every 4-year-old whose family wants it is a very wise investment as we work as a state to improve academic outcomes for all students.

As Steve Barnett, of the National Institute for Early Education Research and Mark Shriver said in a recent article, Quality early learning programs not only give children a strong start in life, they make good economic sense and build a robust workforce. Reports show high rates of return on public investments in early childhood education as a result of improvements not only in early childhood education but also health, economic productivity and reduced crime.

In fact, a [new research brief](#) by Steve Barnett from NIEER finds that in addition to academic gains, high-quality preschool can improve child health in three ways:

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- Introducing children to heart-healthy foods and balanced diets in school and promoting exercise through active play, high-quality preschool can alleviate obesity and prevent the development of metabolic disease in 3- and 4-year-olds. Kids can carry these habits, and outcomes, for the rest of their lives.
- Preschool can improve parents' mental health, parenting skills, and health knowledge through outreach. Parents are the number one educators of children, and high-quality early childhood programs can help them do their best to improve child development and prevent toxic stress.
- Improving socio-emotional skills, cognitive skills, and mental health, high-quality preschool prepares children — especially low-income and dual-language children — for success later in life. This is a worthy goal in and of itself, but since health outcomes strongly correlate to income and education, this boost can also help children become healthier adults.

We would like to provide some background on Rhode Island's high-quality Pre-K Program and the General Assembly's leadership to launch it ten years ago. The General Assembly passed the *Rhode Island Pre-Kindergarten Act* in 2008 establishing a need to expand access to high-quality early childhood education programs to address opportunity gaps in early learning that result in many children entering kindergarten 18 months behind their peers. The Act required state agencies to work together with advocates, school districts, Head Start, and child care programs to develop a high-quality Pre-K demonstration project that builds on the existing infrastructure in the state so that Pre-K could be delivered using a mixed delivery system by child care programs, Head Start, and public schools. The plan for high-quality Pre-K included both 3- and 4-year-olds but started by serving 4-year-olds and focused expansion in communities with low performing schools.

In 2009-2010, the state launched the demonstration program with 7 classrooms serving a total of 126 four-year-olds in four communities (Central Falls, Providence, Warwick, and Woonsocket). Back then, we were one of only 12 states in the U.S. that did not have a State Pre-K program. RI learned from the experience of other states and decided to prioritize having a high-quality program by meeting all the quality standards researchers knew were important to produced lasting achievement gains – including highly qualified and well-compensated teachers, strong professional development and coaching, small class sizes with full-time and effective teaching assistants, and a full 6-hour school day). We also learned from other states that it is important to build Pre-K into the existing infrastructure, including providing opportunities and support so that child care programs, Head Start, agencies and public schools can deliver the program. Our state has remained strongly committed to these high-quality, research-based standards for Pre-K and to a diverse delivery system for Pre-K. Currently Rhode Island is ranked #1 in the U.S. for Pre-K Quality and we 33% of classrooms are in child care centers, 37% are in Head Start programs, and 30% are in public schools.

In 2010 when the state passed a new School Funding Formula, it included categorical funding for Pre-K and a plan to gradually increase funding over the ten-year phase-in plan. Although, the state got off to slow start in the first part of the decade, we have steadily increased general revenue funding for Pre-K going back to 2013. In 2014, Rhode Island was one of 14 states to win a federal expansion grant for Pre-K through the original Preschool Development Grant process. This funding allowed the state to accelerate its planned expansion and has continued through the current school year. Next year, the state will not receive any federal funding for the State Pre-K program so it is **critical that we accelerate general revenue spending to catch up with the intent of the funding formula legislation, so we don't have to close any of the current 60 State Pre-K classrooms (1,080 children).**

It is also **important to expand our State Pre-K program which we know works to improve children's learning and development and narrows the achievement gap at kindergarten entry.** While we rank very high on quality, we rank 33rd nationally for four-year-olds' access to

Pre-K, behind many other states including Connecticut, Maine, New Jersey, New York, and Vermont.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has been working closely with the Governor's office to develop a plan to expand Pre-K to serve all 4-year-olds. We support all the key elements of the Governor's plan, including:

- Maintaining a commitment to meeting high quality, **research-based standards** for Pre-K, including highly-qualified and well-compensated teachers that receive high-quality professional development and coaching.
- Building on the existing infrastructure in the state and maintaining a strong **diverse delivery system** for Pre-K, including child care programs, Head Start agencies, and public schools.
- A plan to improve and expand **early childhood facilities as high quality learning environments** and support the development of **strong Pre-K teachers** and teaching assistants.
- Improving **transitions to kindergarten** and promoting coordination and **alignment of Pre-K with K-3 education**.
- Investing in **early childhood data systems** so we can understand children's enrollment patterns, including which children are getting high-quality Pre-K and which children aren't.
- Making **concurrent investments in the child care system** to improve quality for children starting at birth and developing a pipeline of programs that can deliver Pre-K that meets the needs of working families.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT **recommends retaining statutory language about planning to serve 3-year-olds** in Pre-K. Research shows that two years of Pre-K is better than one year. There are currently 30 states that include some 3-year-olds in State Pre-K. The federal Head Start program serves 3- and 4-year-olds (with Early Head Start serving children starting at birth) and the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires states to provide special education services to all children starting at birth with school districts serving children starting at age 3.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly urge your support for the wise investment in the expansion of Rhode Island's high-quality State Pre-K program put forth by the governor in Article 10. I have visited Pre-K Programs with many of you - you have read to the students, you have gotten down on the floor to talk with them, and we have all seen how engaged they are – and we leave feeling that we want these high quality programs for all of our children. This is the opportunity to keep our state's momentum going with your leadership and commitment to Pre-K through passage of Budget Article 10, Sections 1-4.

Child Care Assistance Program (Section 5)

Earlier this month, we also testified in **support of Section 5 of Article 10 to increase the rates for preschoolers (children ages 3 to 5) in the Child Care Assistance Program** who are enrolled in child care centers. Investing in child care programs helps families access high-quality child care and will help Pre-K be successful.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.