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## **Testimony Re: Article 15 Regarding Children and Families**

**House Finance Committee**

**March 6, 2019**

**Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director**

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 sections of Article 15 related to increasing access to school meals, eliminating the 24-month periodic time limit for Rhode Island Works, and increasing tiered quality rates for family child care programs serving children in the Child Care Assistance Program. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT does not support the language in Article 15 that would remove the requirement for a comprehensive lead inspection and demonstration/certification that they are lead safe or lead free from foster home licensing legislation/requirements.

### **No Student Hungry Initiative (Section 1)**

Eating breakfast at school helps children perform better in the classroom. Students who eat breakfast have better attendance, behavior, and academic performance, especially in math. More days in the classroom and higher achievement set students on a path to graduate and earn higher wages.

**Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports the Governor's proposals to require:**

- (1) That eligible schools participate in CEP and offer free meals to all their children unless doing so would present a financial hardship in which case they can apply for a limited waiver
- (2) That all schools with 70% or more students identified as low-income offer alternative breakfast services, such as breakfast after the bell, "grab-and-go," or breakfast in the classroom.

Rhode Island law requires that all public schools make breakfast available to all students, including students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals based on their income (less than 130% of the federal poverty level for free meals and between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level for reduced-price meals).

During the 2017-2018 school year in Rhode Island, 53 low-income students participated in the School Breakfast Program for every 100 low-income students who participated in the School Lunch Program. Rhode Island ranks 33<sup>rd</sup> in the U.S. for participation in the School Breakfast Program, down from 31<sup>st</sup> last year. If Rhode Island increased low-income student participation in the School Breakfast Program to 70% of School Lunch Program participation, the state would receive \$2.6 million in additional federal funds to support the program.

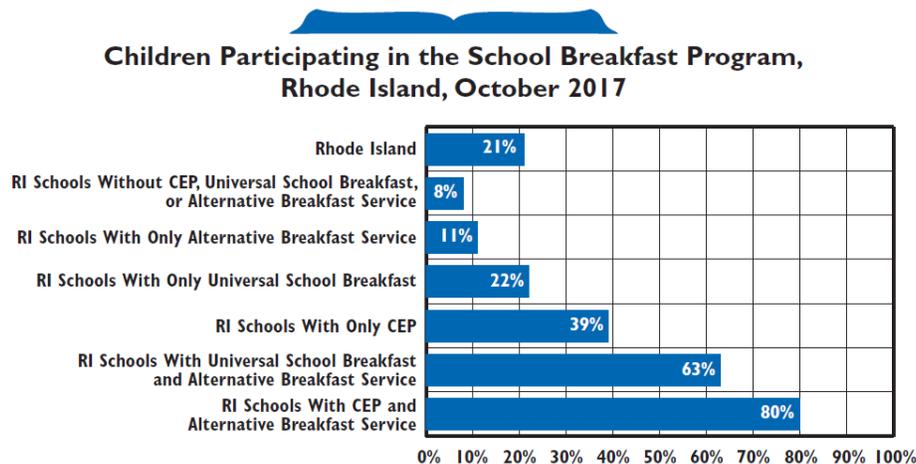
### Alternative Breakfast Models/Breakfast After the Bell

The traditional model of serving breakfast in the cafeteria before school begins often does not reach all the students who need it. Alternative breakfast models offer an opportunity to feed more children by making breakfast more convenient for students. By making breakfast a part of the school day, participation in school breakfast dramatically increases because it is convenient and accessible to all. During the 2017-2018 school year, 69 Rhode Island schools, mostly elementary schools, offered alternative breakfast service, including breakfast in the classroom, “grab and go” breakfasts, bagged breakfasts, or breakfast on a cart.

### Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

The federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows schools and districts with 40% or more students identified as low-income (e.g., enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) or at-risk (i.e., homeless or in foster care) to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students and offers higher reimbursements. During the current school year, Central Falls, all elementary schools in Providence, some schools in Pawtucket, Highlander Charter School, Rhode Island Nurses Institute Middle College Charter School, and the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center are using CEP.

Nationally in 2016-2017, the median state’s CEP take-up rate for eligible school districts was 47%. However, in Rhode Island less than one-third of all eligible schools were participating in CEP.



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Child Nutrition Programs, Office of Statewide Efficiencies, October 2017.

According to the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), “**Advocates and allies should work to create policies that address the two main barriers to school breakfast participation — timing and stigma.**” Data published annually in the *Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* demonstrate that this dual strategy results in the highest school breakfast participation.

### Residence of Children for School Purposes (Sections 2 and 3)

The most successful interventions for youth involved in the juvenile justice system include family treatment, promote health development at the individual, family, and peer levels, and provide comprehensive educational supports and services. While we continue to see a steady annual decline in the number of youth at the Rhode Island Training school, the needs of youth are still

extensive, including the need for strong educational supports during and after their time at the Training School.

While the average age of youth at the Training School in 2017 was 16 years, students' math skills were on average at the sixth grade level and their reading levels were on average at the fifth grade level at entry to the Training School. Of the 201 youth in ninth through twelfth grades who received educational services at the Training School during the 2017 academic year, 25% (51) received special education services based on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Youth need access to comprehensive educational programming during their time at the Rhode Island Training School, efficient reentry supports as they transition back into the community, and expedited registration back into their school of origin.

#### **Lead Poisoning (Section 4)**

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT does not support the language in Article 15 (Section 23-24.6-14.1. Inspection of foster homes) that would remove the requirement for a comprehensive lead inspection and demonstration/certification that they are lead safe or lead free from foster home licensing legislation/requirements. While we are in strong support of initiatives by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families to increase placement of children in family settings, we feel that it is critical to ensure that foster homes are safe for children in terms of lead hazards. Eliminating the lead inspection requirement for foster homes via this Budget Article would eliminate a long-standing policy to ensure healthy environments for children in foster homes and would put vulnerable children at increased risk for lead poisoning, which can result in long-lasting and severe negative health outcomes. We urge swift action to use lead abatement resources through the Housing Resource Commission and Rhode Island Housing to abate lead issues in prospective kinship homes that are being held up due to lead issues so that children can benefit from these kinship placements.

#### **Rhode Island Works (Section 5)**

We also support the proposal to eliminate the periodic time limit for the Rhode Island Works (RI Works) program, the state's TANF (or welfare) program for low-income families. This program helps very low-income families meet their basic needs by providing cash assistance, SNAP benefits, health insurance, and subsidized child care to families and by providing parents with the education, training, and workforce readiness programs they need to prepare for success in the workplace.

Many parents receiving RI Works assistance have multiple barriers to employment, including limited literacy and/or English proficiency, physical and behavioral health challenges, and histories of domestic violence and/or homelessness. Thirty-one percent of parents have not completed high school, and more than one-third (37%) of those tested in English tested at or below the sixth-grade reading level, while almost two-thirds (66%) of native Spanish speakers enrolled in RI Works tested at or below the sixth-grade reading level on a Spanish-language version of the test.

The current 24-month time limit does not provide enough time for parents to prepare for entry into and success in the workforce. Rhode Island is one of only eight states that imposes a periodic time limit on its entire caseload. We urge you to repeal the state's 24-month periodic time limit which will simplify the program and allow parents the time they need to prepare for success in our state's workforce.

## **Child Care Assistance Program (Section 6)**

We also support increased rates and establishing tiered quality rates for family child care providers serving children under age 6 in the Child Care Assistance Program. Last year, the General Assembly took a significant step forward by increasing and establishing tiered quality rates for child care centers serving children under age 6, funded with \$3.6 million in federal resources available through the Child Care and Development Block Grant. In July 2018, child care centers serving infants received up to a 33% increase in rates and centers serving preschoolers received up to a 21% increase in rates. The rate for infants and toddlers in 5-star centers now meets the federal benchmark for equal access to quality, the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile of a recent market rates study. However, rates for older children in centers and all children in family child care do not meet the federal benchmark.

There are 42 states now that use tiered quality rates to support quality improvement and provide access to higher-quality programs. Higher-quality programs receive larger increases.

We recommend that the state establish tiered quality rates for the family child care program with that can attain a 5-star rating paid at or above the federal benchmark for equal access to quality (\$200/week for infants and toddlers, \$191.50 for preschoolers, and \$180.00/week for school-age children).

We certainly agree with the Governor Raimondo's proposal to remove the requirement inserted during Governor Carcieri's administration which prohibits state payment rates that exceed fees charged to private paying families. This requirement means that programs must raise the fees for all families in order to pull in the higher payments from the state to support quality.

The BrightStars Quality Rating and Improvement System has been designed to fairly and accurately measure the quality of child care and early learning programs. As of January 2019, 80% of the licensed family child care programs in the state have a BrightStars rating and all programs that serve children in the Child Care Assistance Program have a rating. Currently, there are 124 family child care programs that have a 2-star rating, 1 program that has a 3-star rating, and 5 programs that currently have a 4-star rating. In previous years, programs have achieved a 5-star rating.

Twenty-two percent of the children in the Child Care Assistance Program are enrolled in family child care homes, with Hispanic children more likely to be enrolled than non-Hispanic children. Family child care providers are stepping up to the plate to meet high-quality standards that support children's development and learning. It is time for the state to recognize and reward their efforts.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.