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Testimony Re: S-0247, Rhode Island Early Intervention Extension

Senate Education Committee

March 5, 2025

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports Senator Valverde's bill, S-0247, which would require the state to develop a plan and then by January 2028 to allow children enrolled in Early Intervention and who are qualified to be eligible for preschool special education services to receive their IDEA services through their Early Intervention team until September following the child's third birthday.

This is a really good idea to promote continuity and quality of services for young children with developmental delays and disabilities. Several states have already implemented policies like this, and some allow children to remain in Early Intervention all the way up until they enter kindergarten.

Maintaining an effective and qualified service team is very important for children with developmental delays and disabilities to make progress. Early Intervention can be much more flexible and accommodating for family circumstances since the program follows the child across situations and settings. The federal law requires Early Intervention to be delivered in natural settings including homes, child care/early learning programs, and neighborhood settings. Early Intervention teams travel and can stick with families when they move across city/town lines as long as they remain in the state.

We encourage the state to also strongly consider the need to improve financing, staffing, and structure of preschool special education to enable children ages 3 -5 who were not enrolled in Early Intervention to also have access to therapies that are delivered in community-based settings through expanding the itinerant preschool special education model and considering regional delivery.

Early Intervention also needs ongoing attention since we continue to have an unacceptable waiting list of children and have vacant staff positions for essential clinical staff including PTs, OTs, and SLPs. Early Intervention has not returned to its full service capacity yet and we also want to make sure EI is adequately staffed to deliver services to all babies and young children who need it as early as possible. The state's most recent federal determination found that our EI program needed "substantial intervention" to meet federal requirements.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.