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Testimony Re: H-5076, Rhode Island
Department of Education FY26 Budget
House Finance Committee
March 18, 2025
Leanne Barrett, Director of Early Childhood
Policy and Strategy



Rhode Island KIDS COUNT coordinates the Right from the Start Campaign, a state policy coalition led by eight organizations to advance state policies and budget priorities that help babies and young children get off to the right start.

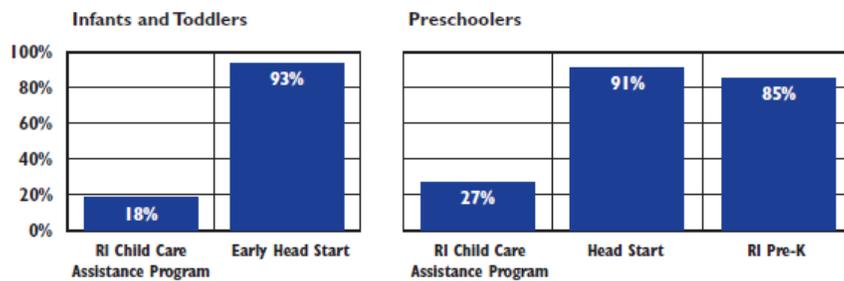
Both Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign **strongly oppose the Governor's proposal to cut \$1.1 million from the RI Department of Education's Early Childhood Education Categorical Funding budget, which is being used to sustain and strengthen access to infant and toddler care in alignment with the state's 2022 RI Pre-K Expansion Plan** developed by the RI Department of Education, RI Department of Human Services, and RI Children's Cabinet.

In 2022, the General Assembly required state agencies to produce a plan to expand RI Pre-K to serve 5,000 children ages 3 and 4 within five years. The General Assembly required the plan to include recommendations to reduce unintended harm to the infant/toddler child care system which often arises in states that focus on expanding Pre-K. [The state Pre-K expansion plan includes a recommendation to establish a 30% infant-toddler set aside of Pre-K funding for infants and toddlers](#), a strategy implemented by Illinois and recommended by several national organizations, including [Zero to Three](#), [New America](#), and [The Policy Equity Group](#).

When free, high-quality Pre-K is expanded, child care programs sometimes shut down infant/toddler classrooms to convert them to a state Pre-K classroom or they may shut them down if they can no longer sustain them with reduced preschool enrollment if children enroll elsewhere in new free, high-quality Pre-K options. Revenues from preschool help to cover the operating losses from infant/toddler care. Many infant/toddler programs also face greater challenges finding qualified educators for infants and toddlers after a Pre-K expansion since a teacher with a CDA credential can earn more working as an assistant in a Pre-K classroom. **New York City lost 2,700 spots for infants and toddlers in child care programs during a Pre-K expansion.** In February, a statewide child care organization in Rhode Island reported that 20% of their classrooms were currently closed due to staffing issues – many of these are infant/toddler classrooms.

In 2024, the Governor proposed, and the General Assembly concurred, that \$7.1 million in new state general revenue for the Early Childhood Education categorical be included in the final enacted FY25 budget. Of this total, \$6 million was spent on new RI Pre-K seats and \$1.1 million (15% of the \$7.1 million) was transferred to the Department of Human Services to sustain and strengthen access to quality infant/toddler child care. This new general revenue funding is the first new state general revenue funding for child care that we have won in 20 years, after losing \$46 million in funding during the Great Recession that has never been restored. This new \$1.1 million in general revenue funding is being used to implement a national model program, Child Care WAGE\$, to supplement the wages of the most qualified but lowest paid infant/toddler educators statewide, so they remain working in those critical jobs. High-quality infant/toddler child care builds the foundation for lifelong learning and mental health but is difficult to find.

Enrollment in Programs with a High-Quality BrightStars Rating by Funding Source, Rhode Island, 2023



Sources: Rhode Island Head Start Programs, 2023. Rhode Island Department of Education, 2023. Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2023.

We are asking the General Assembly to recognize the value of this funding for the infant/toddler child care system by requiring the state to follow the 2022 RI Pre-K Expansion Plan and ensure this \$1.1 million continues into FY26 and beyond. Just like funding for Pre-K must continue to ensure families have access to high-quality preschool, we must continue the aligned funding allocated to infant/toddler child care to ensure families have access to quality child care options for our most vulnerable children.

We are also working with Rep. Donovan and Senator DiPalma to restore this infant/toddler funding in the FY26 budget and with Rep. McNamara and Senator Gallo to put the infant/toddler set aside in the Rhode Island Pre-K statute for all future Pre-K expansions.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.