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Testimony Re: S-0667, Sustaining \$1.1 Million for Infants and Toddlers in RIDE Early Childhood Categorical
Senate Finance Committee
May 27, 2025
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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 support passage of Chairman DiPalma's bill, S-0667, to sustain \$1.1 for infants and toddlers that was in the FY25 budget and transferred from RIDE's Early Childhood Categorical funding to DHS to be used to sustain and strengthen access to quality infant/toddler in alignment with the state's 2022 Pre-K plan.

In 2010, the RI Permanent Foundation Funding Education Aid Act was enacted with Early Childhood as a core categorical fund to be managed by the RI Department of Education rather than by school districts. [Referred to as the early childhood categorical, the statute](#) specifies that permanent direct state funding shall be provided "to increase access to voluntary, free, high-quality pre-kindergarten programs. **The department shall recommend criteria for the purpose of allocating any and all early childhood program funds as may be determined by the general assembly.**"

State general revenue funding for the Early Childhood Categorical has increased from \$1.0 million in 2010 to \$29.9 million in 2025. Almost all of the funding has gone to supporting RI Pre-K classrooms for four-year-old children. An additional \$1.2 million in state general revenue funding for the Head Start program model predates the funding for RI Pre-K and is managed separately by the Department of Human Services to sustain and strengthen access to Head Start for three- and four-year-old children with high needs. In 2023 and beyond, state general revenue funding for Head Start has been supplemented with \$3 million in TANF funds focusing on increasing wages for Early Head Start and Head Start teachers so classrooms could be staffed and open.

In 2022, the General Assembly [amended the RI Prekindergarten Education Act](#) requiring the RI Department of Education, the RI Department of Human Services, and the RI Children's Cabinet to develop a plan for prekindergarten

expansion. “On or before December 31, 2022, the department of elementary and secondary education, in collaboration with the department of human services and the children’s cabinet, as established in § 45-72.5, shall submit to the governor, speaker of the house, president of the senate, and chairs of house and senate finance and education committees, an annual growth plan to expand the state prekindergarten program to five thousand (5,000) seats, for three- and four-year-old children, over five (5) years, beginning in FY 2024, as well as recommendations for achieving universal prekindergarten in the state. **The growth plan shall detail** annual targets and projected funding needs, as well as **how the state will:** (a) Equitably distribute prekindergarten funding to eligible providers; **(b) Ensure that access to infant and toddler care is not at risk as the state prekindergarten program is expanded.** (c) Prepare, recruit and retain a highly-qualified early childhood workforce, including adequate wages for early childhood educators, regardless of setting; (d) Build capacity among new and existing providers to ensure quality standards are met in all settings; and, (e) Ensure providers in the mixed-delivery system have sufficient facilities to expand access to high-quality prekindergarten services.”

In December 2022, the RI Department of Education, RI Department of Human Services, and the RI Children’s Cabinet released their [report and recommendations on prekindergarten expansion](#). Key recommendations include:

- **Establishing a 30% infant/toddler set-aside spending benchmark that is tied to RI Pre-K expansion** to ensure aligned investment in the infant/toddler sector as RI Pre-K expands. Funding would be used to increase capacity, sustainability, and quality of the infant/toddler sector. Specific suggestions were to use these funds to increase the infant/toddler rate for the Child Care Assistance Program, to fund wage supplements for infant/toddler child care teachers, and to expand access to Early Head Start.

In 2024, the state began implementing infant/toddler funding connected to RI Pre-K funding by transferring \$1.1 million in funding for RI Pre-K expansion from RIDE’s Early Childhood Categorical fund to the RI Department of Human Services to help sustain and strengthen access to high-quality infant/toddler child care. This funding is being used to provide Child Care WAGE\$ salary supplements to approximately 300 of the most qualified but lowest paid infant toddler teachers statewide.

In about half the states in the U.S. the Pre-K and child care funding is managed in the same department/office of early childhood. Rhode Island may not have a consolidated Office of Early Childhood, but we can make it easier for early childhood systems to work together across departments.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Infant/Toddler Workforce Funding & RI Pre-K Related Legislation 2025



Right from the
Start

Pre-K Education Expansion Guidelines

[H-5199 \(McNamara\) & S-0394 \(Gallo\)](#)

Sustain Infant/Toddler Funding from Pre-K Expansion

[H-6019 \(Donovan\) & S-0667 \(DiPalma\)](#)

Early Educator Workforce Act

[H-5200 \(Donovan\) & S-0673 \(Urso\)](#)

In 2022, the General Assembly passed legislation requiring the RI Department of Education, the RI Department of Human Services and the RI Children's Cabinet to develop a plan and cost estimates to expand the state prekindergarten program to five thousand (5,000) seats for three- and four-year-old children, as well as recommendations for achieving universal prekindergarten in the state. The legislation required the plan to include **specific plans to ensure infant and toddler care is not at risk** as prekindergarten is expanded and to outline **how the state would prepare, recruit, and retain a highly qualified early childhood workforce, including adequate compensation, regardless of setting.**

RI Pre-K Education Implementation & Expansion Guidelines (H-5199/McNamara & S-0394/Gallo)

sets guidelines for implementation and expansion of voluntary publicly funded preschool for children ages three and four. It sets a goal to expand Pre-K access as funds are available so that at least 70% of all three- and four-year-olds could enroll and requires that Pre-K be delivered through a mixed delivery system including Head Start, child care, and public schools. In addition, the legislation requires that future increases in funding allocated for expansion of the RI Pre-K program incorporate a 30% set aside to sustain and expand access to high-quality infant and toddler early care and education programs including child care and Early Head Start. **The infant/toddler set aside is a key element of the [state's 2022 Pre-K plan](#) and is intended as a new permanent funding stream to sustain and strengthen access to infant/toddler early care and education** that would grow as funding for Pre-K grows. The infant/toddler set-aside is the only strategy outlined in the state plan to prevent harm to infant/toddler programs.

Sustain Infant/Toddler Funding from the FY25 RI Pre-K Expansion (H-6019/Donovan & S-0667/DiPalma)

would require that the state continue the \$1.1 million in funding allocated in the RI Department of Education's FY25 Early Childhood Categorical fund budget into FY26 as part of the Department of Human Services' budget to sustain and strengthen access to infant/toddler programs. **In 2024, \$1.1 million in state general revenue allocated to RI Pre-K expansion in the FY25 budget (15.5% of the \$7.1 million allocated for RI Pre-K expansion) was transferred from RIDE to DHS to sustain and strengthen access to quality infant and toddler child care.** This funding is being used to provide significant Child Care WAGE\$ salary supplements to approximately 300 infant/toddler educators and is helping to keep higher quality classrooms and family child care programs open statewide. This infant/toddler funding was overlooked in both RIDE's and DHS's FY26 proposed budgets but is an essential commitment in the [2022 RI Pre-K Expansion Report](#) commissioned by the General Assembly and a strategy recommended by [Zero to Three](#) and by [New America](#) to sustain and strengthen infant/toddler programs in the context of Pre-K expansion.

Early Educator Workforce Act (H-5200/Donovan and S-0673/Urso) will ensure at least \$1 million/year is invested in the Child Care WAGE\$ program each year to retain our most highly skilled but lowest paid child care educators statewide. **Specifically, if the \$1 million in general revenue transferred in FY25 from RIDE Pre-K funding to DHS to reduce harm to infant/toddler programs from RI Pre-K expansion is continued in FY26 (and beyond), it will help keep approximately 300 qualified educators working in infant and toddler child care programs statewide.** The Child Care WAGE\$ program is a [national model](#) that provides education-based salary supplements to frontline early educators who earn low wages. In RI the salary supplements range from \$3,000/year for a CDA credential to \$12,000/year for a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Child Care WAGE\$ has been shown to dramatically improve staff retention and the quality of care available to children. The Early Educators Workforce bill also codifies two other critical parts of the early educator workforce development system in statute: the [T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Workforce Development program](#) and the [RI Early Childhood Registered Apprenticeship program](#).

