



November 17, 2020

The Honorable Rep. Marvin Abney
House Finance Committee
82 Smith Street, Room 35
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Invest in Rhode Island's young children and working families now to help them get through the COVID-19 pandemic and emerge even stronger

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the House Finance Committee:

As you work to finalize the FY 2021 budget during these unprecedented times, the Right from the Start campaign writes to urge you to prioritize investments in Rhode Island's young children and working families to help them get through the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and emerge even stronger on the other side.

One of the most important investments Rhode Island can make to support the health and development of our young children, the economic wellbeing of our working families, and our state's economic rebound from the pandemic is to make increased rates for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) permanent to meet the federal equal access standard required by the Child Care and Development Block Grant that was needed pre-COVID. It is also critical to maintain the policy of payment based on enrollment and not attendance.

Governor Raimondo's creation of the \$5 million Child Care Relief Fund and approval of increased CCAP rates has allowed our child care sector to successfully reopen and once again serve working families. While most Rhode Island child care providers have reopened, they continue to face increased costs associated with maintaining stable groups of children and staff every day, cleaning and sanitization protocols, providing extended paid sick time for staff during quarantine periods, and hiring substitute staff. These increased costs are happening simultaneous with decreased private pay and CCAP enrollment, as many parents are unemployed or chose to keep their children home due to health concerns. This difficult reality has placed many providers on the razor's edge of being able to operate.

Given these difficult circumstances facing Rhode Island's child care market, we strongly urge you to make the increased tiered CCAP rates implemented by Governor Raimondo in June permanent in the FY 2021 budget. It is important to keep the rates tiered and connected to quality so the state can continue to incentivize and support quality improvement using research-based standards across all settings and ages of children. We also urge the use of an additional \$5 million of CARES Act funding to further bolster the Child Care Relief Fund. These investments will allow our child care providers to continue to operate and continue to serve working families as the pandemic unfortunately continues well into 2021.

We also urge you to maintain full funding for RI Pre-K, Head Start, and family home visiting programs, which all have proven records of supporting young children. The combination of quality early childhood educational experiences and wraparound social support services offered by these programs are exactly what are needed to support children and working families through this very difficult period.



We recognize that Rhode Island is facing a challenging budget environment. However, cuts to child care funding, early childhood educational programs, and family home visiting would be shortsighted, hurting children and working families at precisely the time these programs are needed most.

Please make CCAP rate increases permanent and maintain critical funding for RI Pre-K, Head Start, and family home visiting programs.

In addition, we urge you to consider allocating \$500,000 (\$250,000/year for two years) to fund the [Rhode Island Infant/Toddler Teacher Education and Retention Awards Demonstration Program](#) that was designed by a public-private task force. This is a critical strategy that would likely gain national attention with a strong randomized control study led by an economist at Brown University who believes she can secure additional evaluation funding from the Arnold Foundation if there is federal or state funding allocated to this intervention. This demonstration project would complement the Department of Human Services' new apprenticeship program by reaching early educators who have already attained a credential or completed college coursework and degrees, including family child care providers.

Finally, the Right from the Start campaign urges you to support our other budget and legislative priorities, which are designed to ensure that *ALL* Rhode Island kids, regardless of zip code, race, ethnicity, or family income, get off to the right start in life:

- Include the \$65 million affordable housing bond, which will expand affordable housing and help early learning programs improve their facilities, in the FY 2021 budget.
- Improve Rhode Island's paid family leave policy so all parents, and especially lower wage-earning parents, can have adequate income to remain at home with newborns, adoptive, and foster children for at least 12 weeks.
- Include coverage of community-based doula services through Medicaid in the FY 20201 budget.
- Support legislation requiring private health insurance plans to cover community-based doula services.
- Establish goals for early educator wages and implement strategies to increase compensation statewide. We should ensure wages of frontline staff exposed to the virus are above poverty level, and educators that have early childhood credentials/degrees and demonstrate effective practice are rewarded with increased wages.

Sincerely,

The Right from the Start Campaign Steering Committee

Leanne Barrett, Rhode Island Kids Count ; Marcela Betancur, Latino Policy Institute; Susan Dickstein, RI Association for Infant Mental Health; Rachel Flum, Economic Progress Institute; Lisa Hildebrand, RI Association for the Education of Young Children; Khadija Lewis Khan, Beautiful Beginnings; Mary Varr, Woonsocket Head Start Child Development Association