

February 28, 2024

House Committee on Education

Rhode Island State House

Providence, RI 02903

Re: Support for Bill H-7438

Dear members of the House Committee on Education:

I am writing today in support of establishing the Early Childhood IDEA Task Force as outlined in Bill H-7438. This bill would establish and fund a public-private task to develop a financing and staffing plan for a consistent system of educational and developmental services for babies and young children (up to 5 years old) with developmental delays and disabilities (across Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education).

As an early childhood educator in Providence, I know how essential it is that all children receive high quality early childhood services; this is especially true for children with special needs, who often face far more challenges reaching developmental milestones without adult support compared to their typically developing peers. It is during the first 5 years of a child's life that 90% of their brain development occurs. This critical time is when children, if exposed to high quality education and developmental services and experiences, develop skills essential to their future overall success (encompassing any time from the early childhood years to adulthood). These skills include self-regulation, communication skills, problem solving skills, and other cognitive skills, to name a few. As a community, we are already making strides to better support babies and children with special needs – this is evident when we take a look at Rhode Island's Early Intervention and Special Education services, and their caseloads. Additionally, the state's public pre-k efforts to reach children with special needs at an early age has proved successful – in Providence alone, at least a third to half of the students in pre-k classrooms have IEPs. However, as the number of children with special needs grows, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is evident that our efforts to serve this at-risk population are not enough. Establishing the Early Childhood IDEA Task Force would be a good first step in coming up with a plan to alleviate this problem.

Understandably, pinpointing special needs at an early age can be challenging, especially when we take into consideration the staffing shortage across the early intervention and early childhood education fields. During the early childhood years (birth to age 5) alone is when most developmental delays and disabilities become evident; services like Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education prove to be extremely important during this critical time. While understaffed and underfunded, it is

essential that we continue striving to conduct developmental screenings for all children in Rhode Island. This rings especially true as research has shown that the earlier we are able to catch delays and disabilities, the more equipped we are to support children with special needs. When we address babies' and young children's special needs early, we are ensuring that they are not left behind. Not only are we working to offset some of the negative academic and societal effects related to having special needs, we are also helping families and educators develop individualized education plans and advocacy skills to further support their children.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I would have an average of 2-3 children with growing special needs in my classroom. The average within the last two years has increased to 3-5 children per year. This includes both children who have received early intervention services as well as children who have been flagged for delays in developmental screenings. The reality is that the number of children needing special services is only increasing and we need to be more equipped to address their needs. Creating the IDEA task force would help make sure that we, as a society, are not leaving young children behind.

In conclusion, **I strongly urge the Committee to pass bill H-7438 and establish the Early Childhood IDEA Task Force.** This is an essential step towards addressing the early childhood staffing shortage crisis and providing every baby and young child in Rhode Island the educational and developmental foundation they need to have their needs met.

Should you have any questions, you may contact me by phone at 401-302-3257. I thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Aimée Salazar Martinez