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Testimony Re: H-7438, Rhode Island Early
Childhood IDEA Task Force

House Education Committee
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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 Rep. Carson's bill, H-7438, to create and fund an Early Childhood IDEA Task force to develop recommendations, including adequate staffing and financing, to meet the needs of babies and young children who have developmental delays and disabilities

Families with babies and young children across the state are facing significant delays and disruptions in receiving Early Intervention (under age 3) and Preschool Special Education (ages 3 to K entry) services that are required under the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*.

The state needs a coherent Birth to Kindergarten IDEA plan which would include examining the design and delivery of services to children and the financing and staffing needed. Rhode Island could consider models used in other states including offering a Birth through 5 Early Intervention system and/or regionalizing preschool special education services so they can cross district lines and meet family needs. Rhode Island needs a plan to develop, attract, and retain qualified staff for these systems.

The Early Childhood IDEA system in Rhode Island is complicated and has not been adequately financed. The Early Intervention system is overseen by EOHHS and involves 9 agencies. The state allowed this system to go more than 20 years without a rate increase, leading to a staffing crisis and waiting list. The preschool special education system is overseen by RIDE and involves 35 school districts, one state-operated school, and one charter school. Most school districts are screening only about one-third of the children they are supposed to screen. And many children are not receiving their services in inclusive settings.

Data as of mid-February indicate that there are 623 children who have been waiting for Early Intervention for more than 45 days. This is about one-third of the number of children typically enrolled in Early Intervention before the pandemic. School districts are also struggling to fill staff positions and meet their obligations and timelines to conduct screenings, complete evaluations, and provide services to children from age 3 up to kindergarten entry.

Babies, young children, and their families need an early childhood IDEA system that works. Early Intervention agencies and school districts need an early childhood IDEA system that works. We all pay the long-term costs when children do not get what they need to thrive.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Early Childhood IDEA Task Force Legislation 2024 H-7438 (Carson) & S-???? (Valverde)



Right from the
Start

The federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* makes states responsible for delivering Early Intervention services to infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities, and it makes states and school districts responsible for overseeing and delivering special education services to young children from age three to kindergarten entry.

In Rhode Island, the Early Intervention program is overseen by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) and delivered by 9 certified Early Intervention agencies. Preschool special education is overseen by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and delivered by 35 school districts, one state-operated school (RI School for the Deaf), and one charter school (Highlander).

Both the Early Intervention and the Preschool Special Education systems in Rhode Island have been **experiencing major financial and staffing problems that limit access for babies and young children to early childhood IDEA services.**

Current Systemic Challenges:

- Early Intervention providers continue to struggle to attract and retain qualified staff. As of November 2023, there were 716 infants and toddlers who had been waiting more than 45 days for services.
- Since 2019, the number of children receiving Early Intervention services in Rhode Island has fallen by 21% and the percentage of children enrolled in Early Intervention who demonstrate improved skills and knowledge has dropped by about 10 percentage points.
- School districts struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers and clinical staff which has caused disruptions and delays in early childhood IDEA evaluations and services.
- In 2023, the Providence Public School District and the Rhode Island Department of Education agreed to a settlement plan citing “systemic failure to comply with federal law” to provide critical IDEA services to preschool-age children. A court-appointed monitor is overseeing the settlement plan.
- Statewide, districts complete developmental screenings for only 36% of preschool-age children.
- Children who live in the four core cities are less likely to be determined eligible for preschool special education (36%) than children in the remainder of the state (52%) with a great deal of variability across school districts.
- Children who live in the four core cities are more likely to receive their IDEA services in a self-contained classroom setting and are less likely to receive IDEA services in an inclusive general setting than children in the remainder of the state.
- There is a great deal of variability across school districts with Providence at 38%, Woonsocket at 60%, and East Greenwich at 95% of preschool children receiving services in an inclusive general education setting.

The Early Childhood IDEA Task Force bill would establish and fund a public-private task force to develop a financing and staffing plan for a coherent system of educational and developmental services for babies and young children with developmental delays and disabilities, from birth up to kindergarten entry (across both Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education).

The Early Childhood IDEA Task Force would:

- Be chaired by RIDE, EOHHS, the RI Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Parents Leading for Educational Equity, and Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.
- Be staffed by the Children’s Cabinet with \$250K to hire expert facilitators and national IDEA policy consultants.
- Include parents, EI agencies, school districts, RIPIN, Sherlock Center, The Arc, The Autism Project, Early Head Start/Head Start, child care providers, and more.
- Require two reports, an interim report due December 2024 and a final report due October 2025. The reports will include:
 - Cost estimates and recommended **funding and staffing strategies to ensure the timely provision of high-quality early childhood IDEA services** by qualified educators and professionals in natural and inclusive settings with sufficient dosage and duration.
 - Recommendations to remove barriers and expand access to education and training to **increase the number of qualified professionals and the diversity of the early childhood IDEA workforce.**
 - An implementation plan and cost estimates to establish and maintain an ongoing multilingual **public awareness and outreach campaign** to educate families about developmental delays and disabilities and how to access early childhood IDEA services.
 - An implementation plan and cost estimates to establish and maintain a **multilingual family resource center** to help families who are struggling with getting evaluations, starting, or maintaining access to early childhood IDEA services.
 - Recommendations to **ensure at least 80% of young children, from infancy up to kindergarten entry, receive routine developmental screenings.**
 - Recommendations to **establish a monitoring system to ensure follow up** on all early childhood IDEA referrals.
 - Strategies to ensure children receive early childhood IDEA services in **natural and least restrictive environments including community-based early care and education settings** chosen by families.
 - Strategies to **enable community-based early care and education programs to support the enrollment, attendance, and full inclusion of young children** with special health care needs, developmental delays, and disabilities.
 - Recommendations to **maximize continuity and minimize disruption of IDEA services** for children from infancy through entry to kindergarten.