



Rhode Island Association for the
Education of Young Children

An Affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children

Promoting excellence in early childhood education

February 28, 2024

Members of House Education Committee,

The Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children voices its strong support for **H-7438: An Act Relating to Education – Early Childhood IDEA Task Force**.

The 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).

At RIAEYC, we deeply understand the need for increased funding and coordination among these critical services. **As a membership organization of early childhood educators and the managing agency for several state contracts that support the sector, we hear countless stories of providers and programs that struggle to meet the needs of children with developmental delays and disabilities due to the lack of collaboration and support from EI and Preschool Special Education.** Whether it be long waitlists for services, lack of specialized training to support children with special needs, or breakdowns in communication, early childhood educators in child care programs bear the brunt of this broken system. For children three-year-old and younger, RI has seen a **21% drop in Early Intervention services**, but this drop in services does not match up with the reported need among the providers we support.

RIAEYC also supports this legislation through an equity lens, as there is notable variability among RI's local education agencies' practices related to inclusion. **The Biden Administration recently released an updated POLICY STATEMENT ON INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS** in November 2023. The Administration expects early childhood special education services to be administered in inclusive environments. In our affluent suburban districts, we are in line with this advice (East Greenwich services 95% of children with special needs in an inclusive environment), whereas our four core cities are more likely to service children in "self-contained" environments (For example, Providence serves only 38% of children with special needs in inclusive environments).

It is our collective responsibility to do better by Rhode Island's youngest learners with developmental delays and disabilities. The Early Childhood IDEA Task Force, made up of dedicated and respected early childhood professionals, is a great first step in addressing this critical policy issue.

Thank You,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L Hildebrand'.

Lisa A. Hildebrand, M.A.
Executive Director

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Alyson E. Panzarella, M.J.
Early Learning & Policy Specialist