

JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

Testimony on H-5596, Prekindergarten Seat Finder

House Education Committee

March 25, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson McNamara and members of the House Education Committee. My name is **Jocelyn Antonio**, and I serve as the **Director of Program Implementation and Policy** at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity.

I urge your **support and passage for H-5596 – An Act Relating to Education – Rhode Island Prekindergarten Education Act**, sponsored by Representative Shallcross Smith and co-sponsored by Representatives Ackerman, Fellela, Perez, Baginski, Place and Fogarty.

This bill proposes the creation of a **Prekindergarten Seat Finder** to help families identify and secure placements in high-quality early childhood education programs for 3- and 4-year-old olds. While this may seem administrative in nature, from a **public health lens**, this is a critical tool for **promoting child development, reducing health disparities, and supporting long-term health and educational outcomes** – especially for the families who need it most.

The Public Health Value of Early Childhood Education

Education is a well-established **social determinant of health**. It is the **single strongest predictor of lifelong health, well-being, and economic security**.¹ The research is consistent and compelling: early childhood education (ECE) programs have long-term positive impacts on children's physical, mental, and social health outcomes—particularly for children from low-income and minority households.²

Research shows that children who attend high-quality prekindergarten programs are more likely to:

- Start kindergarten ready to learn³
- Experience long-term academic success⁴

¹ Tulane University, “Social Determinant of Health”; Braveman et al., “Wealth Matters for Health Equity”; Ramon et al., “Early Childhood Education to Promote Health Equity”; American Public Health Association, “Education and Health.”

² “Recommendation for Center-Based Early Childhood Education to Promote Health Equity”; Ramon et al., “Early Childhood Education to Promote Health Equity.”

³ Economic Opportunity Institute, “The Link between Early Childhood Education and Health”; Karoly, “The Economic Returns to Early Childhood Education”; Hahn et al., “Early Childhood Education to Promote Health Equity”; Docs for Tots, “Investing in Early Care and Education Is a Powerful Public Health Initiative for America’s Children”; Schoch et al., “Children’s Learning and Development Benefits from High-Quality Early Care and Education”; Healthy People 2030, “Early Childhood Development and Education - Healthy People 2030 | Odphp.Health.Gov”; Kay and Pennucci, “Early Childhood Education for Low-Income Students: A Review of the Evidence and Benefit-Cost Analysis.”

⁴ Hahn and Barnett, “Early Childhood Education: Health, Equity, and Economics.”; Economic Opportunity Institute, “The Link between Early Childhood Education and Health”; Schoch et al., “Children’s Learning and Development Benefits from High-Quality Early Care and Education”; Kay and Pennucci, “Early Childhood Education for Low-Income Students: A Review of the Evidence and Benefit-Cost Analysis.”

- 6% increase in high-school graduation
 - 18% increase in on-time college attendance
 - 5% increase in 4 year college enrollment
- Close achievement gaps between income groups and dual-language learners⁵
- Avoid risk behaviors such as substance misuse, smoking, and involvement in the criminal justice system
- Exhibit better mental and physical health⁶
 - Lower rates of depression
 - Improved social-emotional development
 - Reduced obesity and better nutrition
 - Earlier detection of hearing and vision problems
- Have better long-term employment outcomes and more consistent health insurance access⁷

Early childhood education doesn't just benefit children – it also supports families:

- Increase maternal workforce participation and income
- Reduces out-of-pocket childcare costs
- Offers a strong return in investment- ranging from **\$3 to \$6 for every dollar invested**⁸

Addressing Health Equity and Access Gaps

Despite the well-documented benefits, **many Rhode Island families face barriers to accessing pre-K** – barriers that are even greater for Black, Latino, immigrant, multilingual, and low-income families.

According to the **National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)**

- Rhode Island ranks 28th in the nation for preschool enrollment
- **Only 22%** of 4 year olds were enrolled in state-funded pre-k during school year 2022-2023⁹
 - Of these, 76% were low-income households
- **Only 30% of income-eligible children 4-year-olds** were enrolled in Head Start or State Pre-K¹⁰

⁵ Hahn and Barnett, “Early Childhood Education: Health, Equity, and Economics.”; Schoch et al., “Children’s Learning and Development Benefits from High-Quality Early Care and Education.”

⁶ Schoch et al., “Children’s Learning and Development Benefits from High-Quality Early Care and Education”; Economic Opportunity Institute, “The Link between Early Childhood Education and Health”; Docs for Tots, “Investing in Early Care and Education Is a Powerful Public Health Initiative for America’s Children”; Hahn and Barnett, “Early Childhood Education: Health, Equity, and Economics.”

⁷ Hahn and Barnett, “Early Childhood Education: Health, Equity, and Economics.”; Economic Opportunity Institute, “The Link between Early Childhood Education and Health”; Schoch et al., “Children’s Learning and Development Benefits from High-Quality Early Care and Education”; Docs for Tots, “Investing in Early Care and Education Is a Powerful Public Health Initiative for America’s Children.”

⁸ Ramon et al., “Early Childhood Education to Promote Health Equity”; Karoly, “The Economic Returns to Early Childhood Education”; Hahn and Barnett, “Early Childhood Education: Health, Equity, and Economics.”; Docs for Tots, “Investing in Early Care and Education Is a Powerful Public Health Initiative for America’s Children”; Economic Opportunity Institute, “The Link between Early Childhood Education and Health”; Kay and Pennucci, “Early Childhood Education for Low-Income Students: A Review of the Evidence and Benefit-Cost Analysis.”

⁹ National Institute for Early Education Research.

¹⁰ National Institute for Early Education Research, “Rhode Island.”

- State spending per child dropped to **\$7,121** in 2022-2023 (a \$284 decrease from the previous year when adjusted for inflation)
- Just 21 of Rhode Island’s 39 cities and towns currently participate in state Pre-K ¹¹
 - Children must live in those communities to enroll

Families often don’t know **where to look**, face **waitlists**, or give up due to **confusing application systems and lack of guidance**. This contributes to a system where access depends too much on who you know or where you live, rather than ensuring equity for all children.

Why is H-5996 Different from Existing Tools

The Rhode Island’s Department of Human Services currently offers an Early Learning Program Search tool- a valuable resource for families seeking general child care. However this tool:

- Covers a **wide range of child care settings**, not just pre-K
- Does not offer **real-time availability or program seat counts**
- Lacks **clear guidance for enrollment into public pre-K programs**
- Is not directly aligned with the state’s **universal pre-K expansion goals**

H-5596 fills a critical gap by establishing a tool **specifically tailored to help families:**

- Identify and secure **publicly funded pre-K seats**
- Understand **eligibility and application processes**
- Navigate a fragmented system more easily
- Assist advocates and state agencies in better seeing which cities or towns need more support in filling seats

This tool is especially vital for **first-generation, immigrant, and non-English-speaking families**, who may be unfamiliar with how to access early childhood education but whose children deserve the same opportunities.

Conclusion

I am a product of Head Start. I didn’t speak English when I entered school. It was my Head Start teacher, Ms. Lopez, who sat beside me and translated for me until I learned. The only reason my parents learned about pre-k was because of a neighbor.

Children in Rhode Island – especially those who are first generation, low-income, or multilingual- shouldn’t have to rely on chance to access an education that can shape the rest of their lives.

House Bill 5596 is not duplicative; it’s a smart, equity-driven enhancement to our early childhood infrastructure.

¹¹ Castro, “State-Funded Preschool in Rhode Island Is a Maze. But One Engineered with a Purpose. • Rhode Island Current.”

I urge the committee to support and pass House Bill 5596 so that every child – regardless of zip code, background, or language- has access to the early learning supports they deserve.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

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