



Testimony Re: H-5596 – RI Prekindergarten Education Act, Pre-K Seat Finder

House Education Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice our concerns related to H-5596, the Pre-K “Seat Finder” bill and urge you to hold this bill for further study.

Families across the state are struggling to find and pay for quality child care so they can work, and child care programs are struggling to offer competitive wages so they can find and keep skilled educators. Although we agree that families need more help to find affordable or free high-quality preschools and early learning programs, **we do not believe an unfunded mandate requiring the RI Department of Education to invest time or resources in purchasing, developing, or partnering with an existing tech product to provide information about “real time” openings in licensed child care and preschool programs will remove enough barriers or help very many children enroll in high-quality programs.** In fact, it could unintentionally divert much needed resources away from families and low-wage early childhood educators towards a high-net-worth tech company that would be paid to build this required system.

The biggest barrier families face when looking for preschool is finding a program that is high-quality and affordable (or free). The median cost for year-round child care for a preschool-age children in Rhode Island is \$14,500/year. A family would need to earn over \$200,000/year to have the amount be considered affordable. The only free, high-quality preschool programs are RI Pre-K and Head Start. RI Pre-K manages enrollment through a lottery system and programs maintain waiting lists of children who can enroll if an opening arises. Head Start prioritizes enrollment for children who are living in poverty, receiving SNAP, homeless, in foster care, have a developmental delay or disability, or have other significant challenges. Head Start also has a long waiting list. Both programs face significant staffing and financing challenges and are not able to serve all the families who are eligible. **A new “seat finder” system will not create a sufficient supply of high-quality, affordable preschool.**

Our concerns include:

- 1) **The bill specifies the RI Department of Education would establish this data system to provide real-time availability of**

seats in licensed early learning programs serving three (3) and four (4) year old children. This goes well beyond the RI Pre-K program which the RI Department of Education oversees. The bill uses “pre-k” as a generic term to apply to all programs that are licensed to serve preschool-age children. The RI Pre-K program, operated by RIDE, is a small piece of the overall early learning system that serves children ages 3 and 4 in the state. Rhode Island has 300+ licensed early learning centers with 13,000+ seats for children ages 3 and 4 and 400+ licensed family child care homes that could serve 2,700+ children ages 3 and 4. All Head Start programs and community-based RI Pre-K programs are licensed.

- 2) The RI Department of Human Services is responsible for licensing all community-based child care programs and preschools that serve children ages 3 and 4. **DHS already manages a resource and referral system including a basic program search data system that is required under federal law** and financed with federal Child Care and Development Block Grant funds. **DHS has been working for several years and has invested significant funds to develop RISES (Rhode Island Start Early System), a new child care/early learning program licensing data system and family search tool.** The new family search would include information on ages served, program quality ratings, hours, and information on RI Pre-K and Head Start program options.
- 3) **For at least 30 years, federal law has required that states provide individualized Resource and Referral services to families to help them find child care and early learning programs.** Currently, DHS contracts with the RI Association for the Education of Young Children (RIAEYC) to provide free, individualized Resource and Referral services to families statewide. RIAEYC helps families find and enroll in Head Start and RI Pre-K programs as well as any other program that is licensed to serve children from infancy through age 12.
- 4) While information about opportunities to enroll in affordable (or free) high-quality preschool and highly flexible, on-demand child care options are needed by many families, **we are concerned that this bill is written to enable a tech vendor to win a government contract and/or establish a business-government partnership that will ultimately extract profits from the child care/preschool system.**

There are already online platforms that provide information on licensed child

care and early learning programs in Rhode Island (including Head Start programs and RI Pre-K programs) and link to publicly available information in the DHS family search system. Tech companies can continue to improve and expand online search products and work on engaging licensed programs in Rhode Island to market their programs and maximize their earnings, a portion of which we assume will be extracted as a fee.

However, we strongly feel that a better use of Rhode Island government time and resources would be to support the existing RISES system operated by DHS , work to integrate and connect separate early childhood systems in Rhode Island overseen by four different agencies (RIDE, DHS, EOHHS, and DOH), and improve information available on the family portal at the www.kids.ri.gov website.

Thank you for your time and attention to the needs of Rhode Island's early childhood system. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.