



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

Chairman Pearson and Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

The Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children voices its strong support for **House Bill H7225, Article 9, Section 5**. This proposed funding increases will provide necessary Medicaid rate increases for both Early Intervention and First Connections services. At RIAEYC, our vision is that *all young children thrive and learn in a society dedicated to ensuring they reach their full potential*. Though our work is centered around early childhood care and education, RIAEYC recognizes Early Intervention and First Connections as key partners to actualizing our vision, and investments in these programs will also have a positive impact on the child care system.

Rhode Island's Early Intervention program is experiencing a major financial and staffing crisis that is limiting access for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities. While we are grateful for the General Assembly's stabilization funding of this program through the American Rescue Plan Act, the problem persists as we face the sunset of these funds. It should be noted that a child brain develops rapidly by age three (the period during which children are eligible for these services). Neural connections are made every second of the day, at rates our brains will never see again in our lifetimes. This rapid rate of development in the first three years is what makes Early Intervention and First Connections so successful, but it's also why a waitlist is such a crisis. **As of November 2023, there were 716 infants and toddlers who had been waiting more than 45 days for services. *Every day without services is a missed opportunity.***

Child care providers often find themselves as referral sources for Early Intervention and First Connections, and the COVID-19 pandemic has added yet another layer of challenges for providers to navigate. **Providers know when children in their care need services, and it is painful to see so many days and weeks pass without them.** We have submitted testimony regarding the impacts of lack of investment in child care, and how this impacts quality and causes providers immense stress to the child care system and its providers. **To learn that another cornerstone pillar of our important work with young children is also under such duress is disappointing. Rhode Island is failing its youngest children. We urge you to make this critical investment.**

Thank You,

Lisa A. Hildebrand, M.A.
Executive Director

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