

April 30, 2024
Briana Assante
WAGE\$ Coordinator

Dear House Finance Committee,

My name is Briana Assante. I am the Coordinator of the Step Up To Wage\$ RI Pilot program at The Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children and I am here in support of Representative Donovan's bill, H-7251, the *Early Educator Compensation Stabilization Act*.

I have had the privilege of speaking with hundreds of early childhood educators throughout the implementation of the Step Up to Wage\$ RI pilot program. They share the love they have for this field and for the children in their care. They also tell me of their struggles making ends meet while staying in the field.

Rhode Island Early childhood Educators are currently facing below poverty wages. Most do not have the luxury of taking sick time or receiving other "traditional" benefits. Many of our early childhood educators struggle with having reliable transportation, paying medical bills, keeping a roof over their head, or providing food for their families. When they are not working or caring for their own families, they spend their time seeking professional development trainings or attending college so they can better themselves and to provide better quality education. As you read through the testimonies we've shared with you, you will see Early Childhood Educators are strong, resilient, educated individuals who deserve respect and compensation for the work they do.

The Step Up To WAGE\$ program not only offers much needed supports for educators but it provides piece of mind for employers and improves quality of care for the children in the classrooms. Built into the Step Up To Wage\$ program is an educators' commitment to their educational growth and to their center. Educators will only receive a wage supplement if they meet specific requirements. Educators must consistently care for children in their classroom per each commitment period of 6 months, have a current hourly wage at or below \$23, and they must have proof of early childhood education knowledge in the form of a CDA certificate or college credits. employers or family childcare providers are required to participate in Brightstars and accept CCAP.

Commented [MR1]: What do you think about saying "their place of employment is required to...."?

Step Up to Wage\$ has helped child care programs reduce turnover. The average retention rate of those who were awarded Wage\$ was 97.8% compared to national retention rates of 60%-80%. Of the few folks who did not remain in their place of employment, most either left because of personal family needs or the need to find a job that provides them with medical benefits.

In the short time that the Step Up To WAGES application was open, we had over 600 educators apply with 191 educators currently on our waitlist.

The funds for Step Up to Wage\$ have been depleted. We need your help to continue to provide this support. We've created the infrastructure for this program, and we've seen the difference it can make for the educators, employers and children in their classrooms.

We need to continue to support our early childhood educators so they can focus on educating and caring for the children of Rhode Island.

Sincerely,
Briana Assante