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Testimony Re: H-5199 Relating to Education –
Rhode Island Prekindergarten Education Act
House Finance Committee
May 15, 2025
Leanne Barrett, Director of Early Childhood
Policy and Strategy



Rhode Island KIDS COUNT coordinates the Right from the Start Campaign, a state policy coalition led by eight organizations to advance state policies and budget priorities that help babies and young children get off to the right start.

Both Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign strongly **support Chairman McNamara's bill to amend the original RI Pre-Kindergarten planning bill, H-5199 to establish implementation and expansion guidelines, 16 years after Rhode Island launched the program.**

This bill would establish guidelines in statute to promote the sustainability of the RI Pre-K program and to enable expansion to happen while also providing some resources to sustain and strengthen infant and toddler programs as RI Pre-K expands.

These guidelines include:

- 1) Establishes a clear goal of serving at least **70% of children ages three and four**. Two years of high-quality preschool have been shown to make a significant difference for children, particularly for low-income children and this would align with the existing Head Start system and the preschool special education system.
- 2) Makes a commitment to our **mixed delivery system to build on existing early childhood infrastructure in the state** (child care, Head Start, and public schools) and respond to the needs of working parents.
- 3) Clarifies that the RI Department of Education shall continue to **ensure programs meet research-based quality standards**.
- 4) Requires the state to **work to close the substantial wage gaps** for RI Pre-K and Head Start teachers so we can sustain the very high-quality standards that we know children need.
- 5) Establishes a **30% funding set aside to sustain and strengthen access to quality infant and toddler care** when funds are available for expansion of RI Pre-K.
- 6) Requires the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services to work together to **sustain and expand the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarship program** that was established during the RI Pre-K planning phase and has been in place for 14 years. T.E.A.C.H. has helped many early childhood program staff earn credentials, including bachelor's degrees in early childhood education, while working full time.

Thank you, Chairman McNamara, for sponsoring this legislation and working to ensure Rhode Island has a high-quality early care and education system that promotes long-term success in school and life.

RI Prekindergarten Education Implementation and Expansion Guidelines 2025

H-5199 (McNamara) & S-0394 (Gallo)

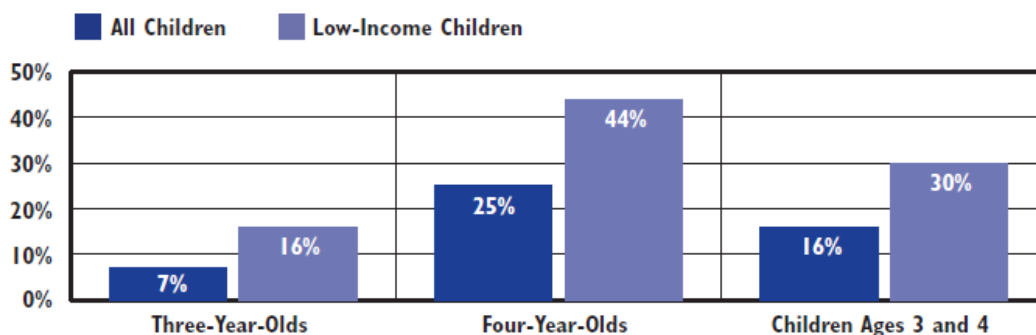


Right from the
Start

The December 2022 [Report and Recommendations on RI Pre-K Expansion](#) commissioned by the General Assembly includes clear recommendations to inform future implementation and expansion of RI Pre-K, a state-managed preschool program that meets nationally recognized quality standards and is implemented by a mixed-delivery system of community-based child care programs, Head Start agencies, and public schools. Recommendations include strategies to:

- Strengthen the mixed delivery system by building a pipeline of programs ready to deliver high-quality preschool for children ages 3 and 4.
- Develop policies and systems to serve more 3-year-olds.
- Prepare, recruit, and retain highly qualified preschool teaching and support staff.
- Ensure the availability and quality of infant and toddler child care is sustained and strengthened as public investment in preschool grows.

Percentage of Children Ages 3 and 4 Enrolled in Head Start and/or RI Pre-K, Rhode Island, 2023-2024



Source: Rhode Island KIDS COUNT calculations using October 2023 enrollment in Head Start and RI Pre-K as numerator and Census 2020 population of children ages 3 and 4 as denominator with low-income population estimated using the % of children receiving free or reduced-price lunch.

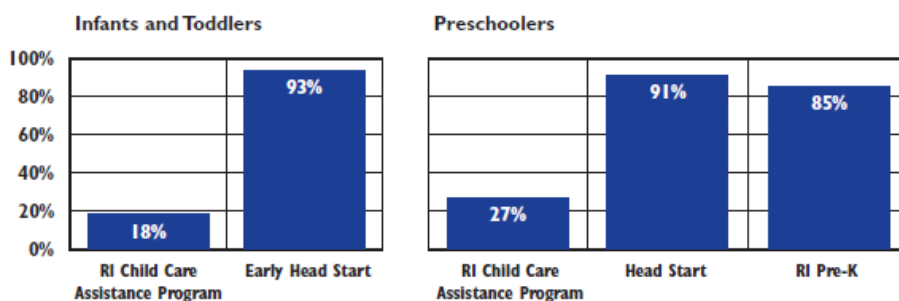
The 2025 bill would amend the RI Pre-Kindergarten Act to include implementation and expansion guidelines aligned with the 2022 recommendations in the report authored by the Rhode Island Department of Education, the Rhode Island Department of Human Services and the Rhode Island Children’s Cabinet as required in the enacted FY23 State Budget Article 10, Section 4.

1. Clarifies that the state’s goal is to provide high-quality, **publicly funded prekindergarten education to at least 70% of children ages three and four** while also **sustaining and expanding access to high-quality child care for infants and toddlers**. *In 2023, 16% of all children ages 3 and 4 and 30% of low-income children ages 3 and 4 were enrolled in either Head Start or RI Pre-K.*
2. Requires that the RI Pre-K program be **sustained and, as funds are available, expanded in a mixed-delivery system** that includes Head Start programs, local education agencies, child care centers, and family child care homes or networks. *In 2023, 40% of RI Pre-K seats were in a Head Start agency, 34% were in a child care center, and 26% were in a public school. Note: 12% of the 2,364 children enrolled in RI Pre-K in 2023 were also enrolled in*

Head Start through braided funding.

3. **Authorizes the RI Department of Education to promulgate and adopt rules and regulations for implementation of high-quality prekindergarten options** to meet or exceed the recommended quality standards outlined by the National Institute for Early Education Research and/or the federal Head Start performance standards. *In 2023, Rhode Island's state prekindergarten program was one of only 5 states that met all research-based quality benchmarks including teacher qualifications and quality monitoring and support.*
4. Requires that funds be allocated **to ensure RI Pre-K and Head Start teacher wages and benefits are competitive with similarly qualified kindergarten teachers.** *In 2023, there was a \$29,000 gap between the average community-based RI Pre-K teacher's and a \$35,000 gap between the average Head Start teacher's salary and the average salary of kindergarten teachers in the state (\$83,000).*
5. Requires that any increase in funding allocated for expansion of the RI Pre-K program includes a **30% set aside of funding to sustain and expand access to high-quality infant and toddler child care and early learning programs including Early Head Start.** *In 2024, \$1.1 million in state general revenue allocated to RI Pre-K expansion in the FY25 budget (15.5% of the \$7.1 million allocated for RI Pre-K expansion) was transferred from RIDE to DHS to sustain and strengthen access to quality infant and toddler child care.*
6. Requires the RI Department of Education and RI Department of Human Services to work together to **sustain and expand the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood workforce development scholarship program** established as required under the original 2008 RI Prekindergarten Education Act.

**Enrollment in Programs with a High-Quality BrightStars Rating
by Funding Source, Rhode Island, 2023**



Sources: Rhode Island Head Start Programs, 2023. Rhode Island Department of Education, 2023. Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2023.

Ensuring Infants and Toddlers Are Not Left Behind

Expansion of public prekindergarten in New York City resulted in a reduction of 2,700 child care spots for infants and toddlers, entirely in areas with concentrated poverty. The **RI Pre-K expansion plan recommends an infant/toddler spending set-aside, like the one in place in Illinois**, to sustain and grow the infant/toddler early care and education system. Rhode Island's infant/toddler set aside recommendation was [highlighted in a national report](#) as an important strategy to strengthen the availability of quality infant and toddler child care during Pre-K expansion.