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**Testimony Re: H-5200, Early Educator  
Workforce Act  
House Finance Committee  
May 15, 2025  
Leanne Barrett, Director of Early Childhood  
Policy & 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 passage of Chairwoman Donovan’s Early Educator Workforce Act, H-5200**, which codifies existing infrastructure Rhode Island needs to help staff our state’s child care and early learning system with qualified individuals. The bill also establishes a \$1 million minimum funding level for the Child Care WAGE\$ program model to keep frontline early educators working in jobs working parents, young children, and our economy needs to thrive.

This bill has been scaled back significantly from last year with a reduced financial ask focusing only on continuing \$1 million for the Child Care WAGE\$ program. In 2024, \$1.1 million of state general revenue was allocated from the FY25 RIDE Early Childhood Categorical budget to fund the Child Care WAGE\$ program for infant/toddler educators statewide. Investing in infant/toddler care is a key component of the 2022 RI Pre-K expansion plan developed by the RI Department of Education and the Rhode Island Department of Human Services. This investment is intended to reduce harm to the infant/toddler care system that is often caused when state Pre-K programs expand.

We have already testified in opposition to the RIDE budget proposal, leaving out this critical component of funding. Senator DiPalma also has a bill introduced to continue this \$1.1 million for the future. And just this week the Senate passed Senator Gallo’s Pre-K Implementation and Expansion plan which would require an investment like this for future expansion of RI Pre-K.

The Child Care WAGE\$ program provides substantial wage supplements to qualified early educators who earn less than \$23/hour that range from \$3,000/year for an individual with an entry level CDA national credential to \$12,000/year for an individual with a bachelor’s degree. These wage supplements help to ensure qualified and skilled early educators can remain

working in the programs that helped them earn their credentials and gain valuable skills promoting the learning and development of infants, toddlers, and young children.

Currently, and for many years, early childhood programs face a staffing crisis and have a “hole in the bucket” spending very limited resources recruiting and training new staff who often leave for higher paying jobs. **Some child care programs report that 60% to 80% of their teachers leave each year. In February, a statewide child care organization reported that 20% of their classrooms are closed because they cannot find and keep qualified staff.**

Many early educators, **almost all of whom are women, and many are women of color**, struggle to afford the cost of housing and food and have few supports and incentives to improve their education or skills or stay with their employer.

[A January 2024 national survey](#) of 10,000 early care and education programs titled *“We Are NOT OK”: Early Childhood Educators and Families Face Rising Challenges as Relief Funds Expire* found that even with the existing early educator workforce recruitment and retention initiatives in place:

- **51% of RI respondents indicate they are experiencing a staffing shortage.**
- **59% of RI respondents indicate that they are not able to serve as many children as they used to because of staffing shortages.**
- **37% of RI respondents had raised family tuition and fees to help increase staff wages and attract/retain staff.**

Families ultimately pay the cost of this workforce crisis when programs are not fully staffed and must close classrooms or raise tuition to unaffordable levels. Children pay the cost because the improved outcomes associated with participating in high-quality early childhood programs depend on stable and strong relationships between children, and skilled early educators.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

**Early Educator Staffing Crisis 2025**  
**Early Educator Workforce Act**  
***H-5200 (Donovan) & S-0673 (Urso)***  
**Child Care for Child Care Educators & EI Staff**  
***H-5196 (Diaz) & S-0100 (DiMario)***



**Right from the Start**

High-quality early childhood programs have effective educators who work with children and families to support young children's rapid brain development. Rhode Island is experiencing a significant staffing crisis as qualified and caring professionals leave for better paying jobs.

Child care educators make among the lowest wages in the state @ \$16.91 per hour in 2023 -- in the same range as animal caretakers and parking lot attendants. **Many child care programs have closed classrooms or are limiting enrollment, particularly for infants and toddlers, due to the inability to find qualified and caring staff to work for the wages offered.** In February, a major statewide child care organization estimated that 20% of their classrooms were closed due to the staffing crisis. In addition to reducing the availability of care, the staffing crisis impacts the quality of care because high staff turnover disrupts relationships that are essential to promote healthy child development and learning.

**Since November 2021, infants and toddlers referred to Early Intervention have had to wait for services due to a staffing crisis.** As of January 2025, there were 283 infants and toddlers with developmental challenges who had been waiting for Early Intervention for more than 45 days.

**Critical Early Educator Investments that Must Continue**

**RI Early Educator Workforce Act:** This bill would establish the [T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Workforce Development program](#), the [RI Early Childhood Registered Apprenticeship program](#), and the [Child Care WAGE\\$ program](#) in statute and **continue the \$1 million in general revenue allocated to reduce harm to infant/toddler programs from RI Pre-K expansion which is being used by the Rhode Island Child Care WAGE\$ program** to supplement the wages of the most qualified but lowest compensated infant and toddler educators statewide. The Child Care WAGE\$ program provides significant wage supplements (ranging from \$3,000/year for a CDA credential to \$12,000/year for a bachelor's degree in early childhood education) to credentialed early educators who earn less than \$23/hour and work on the frontlines in early learning programs. Child Care WAGE\$ has been shown to dramatically improve staff retention and the quality of care available to children. **H-5200/Donovan and S-0673/Urso would continue the \$1 million/year investment in the Child Care WAGE\$ to recognize and retain our most highly skilled but lowest paid infant and toddler educators.**

**RI Child Care for Child Care Educators & EI Staff:** In August 2023, the state launched a **Child Care for Child Care Educators** pilot program modeled on a successful program in Kentucky to attract and retain child care educators by covering the cost of child care for frontline staff. The program has been funded with existing federal funds through an FY24 budget amendment by Speaker Shekarchi that was continued through FY25. **The program is now scheduled to end in July 2025 unless the General Assembly removes the sunset date.** As of October 2024, 570 child care educators with 831 children under age 13 were approved to participate in the program. Almost half of the licensed child care centers and about 5% of family child care homes in the state have at least one staff member participating. Almost 75% of the approved applicants are single mothers. **Many of the applications from two working parent households have been denied because they are over the family income limit of 300% FPL.** Expanding this program to include Early Intervention (EI) staff would help attract and retain EI staff and eliminate the waiting list for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities. **H-5196/Diaz and S-0100/DiMario would remove the sunset date from this program, remove the cap on family income (to match the Kentucky model), and make Early Intervention staff eligible too.**