

April 28, 2026

**Testimony in Support of HB-7317 (Head Start Support)**

**Subject: FOR HB-7317**

Dear Chair Abney and Esteemed Members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Dr. Alison Tovar, and I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the Brown University School of Public Health, where my research focuses on nutrition, child development, and health equity in early childhood. I write in strong support of HB-7317, sponsored by Representative Donovan, which would strengthen state support for Rhode Island's Head Start programs.

Much of my research over the past 15 years has been conducted in partnership with early care and education settings — including Head Start and Early Head Start programs — to improve children's nutrition and physical activity environments during a critical period of development. This work has given me a clear and consistent view of two truths.

The first is that Head Start is one of the most important public investments we make in child health and well-being. Decades of evidence demonstrate that high-quality early childhood programs improve cognitive, social-emotional, nutritional, and long-term health outcomes — particularly for children from families experiencing economic hardship.

The second is that Head Start programs in Rhode Island are profoundly stretched. Teachers and program directors are deeply committed and remarkably skilled, but they are working within a system that is chronically under-resourced. Even essential health-promoting work — improving meals, expanding physical activity, supporting families around feeding and nutrition — becomes extraordinarily difficult when staff are stretched thin, turnover is high, and basic operating capacity is uncertain. The committed people inside these programs cannot carry the system on their shoulders alone.

State investment in Head Start is a direct investment in children's health, families' stability, and Rhode Island's long-term well-being. HB-7317 is a meaningful step toward giving these programs the foundation they need to thrive.

I respectfully urge the Committee to support HB-7317.

Thank you for your consideration and for your leadership on behalf of Rhode Island's youngest children.

Sincerely,

Alison Tower

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