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Testimony on House Bill 7317, Rhode Island Early Educator Workforce Act House Finance Committee April 28, 2025

Good afternoon members of the House Finance Committee. My name is **Jocelyn Antonio**. I am a resident of Cumberland, Rhode Island. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity as a public health professional.

I strong urge your favorable consideration and support for House Bill 7317 – An Act Relating to Education – Rhode Island Early Educator Workforce Act, sponsored by Representative Donovan and co-sponsored by Representatives Diaz, Shallcross Smith, Ajello, Potter, Fogarty, Speakman, Cotter, Kazarian, and Boylan.

This legislation would stabilize the state’s childcare system by addressing the low wages and high turnover rates of early childhood educators. The bill directs the Department of Human Services and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to codify effective strategies to help Rhode Island’s child care and early learning programs attract, develop, and retain qualified and caring staff by establishing the TEACH Early Childhood Workforce Development program, the RI Early Childhood Registered Apprenticeship program, and mandating an annual allocation of at least \$1 million for the Child Care WAGE\$ program.

Public Health Implications of Early Childhood Education

Education is a well-established **social determinant of health**. It is the **single strongest predictor of lifelong health, well-being, and economic security** [1], [2], [3], [4]. The research is consistent and compelling: early childhood education (ECE) programs have long-term positive impacts on children’s physical, mental, and social health outcomes—particularly for children from low-income and minority households [3], [5].

Research shows that children who attend high-quality prekindergarten programs are more likely to:

- Start kindergarten ready to learn [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12]
- Experience long-term academic success [6], [10], [12], [13]
 - 6% increase in high-school graduation
 - 18% increase in on-time college attendance
 - 5% increase in 4-year college enrollment
- Close achievement gaps between income groups and dual-language learners [10], [13]
- Avoid risk behaviors such as substance misuse, smoking, and involvement in the criminal justice system
- Exhibit better mental and physical health [6], [9], [10], [13]
 - Lower rates of depression
 - Improved social-emotional development
 - Reduced obesity and better nutrition
 - Earlier detection of hearing and vision problems
- Have better long-term employment outcomes and more consistent health insurance access [6], [9], [10], [13]

Early childhood education doesn't just benefit children – it also supports families:

- Increase maternal workforce participation and income
- Reduces out-of-pocket childcare costs
- Offers a strong return in investment- ranging from **\$3 to \$6 for every dollar invested [3], [6], [7], [9], [13]**

The Role of Educators in Child Health and Development

Early childhood educators are the foundation of a strong learning journey. They guide the youngest members of our society through their first interactions with the education system and nurture and inspire curiosity. As RIDE's website states, "high-quality early childhood education produces substantial long-term educational, social, and economic benefit with the largest benefit for children occurring when teachers are professionally prepared and adequately compensated."

Yet, the compensation early childhood educators receive does not reflect the critical role they play. That is unacceptable.

Challenges Facing the Early Educator Workforce

Rhode Island has been experiencing an early childhood educator workforce crisis. Much of this crisis stems from persistently low wages – childcare educators earn among the lowest wages in the state, averaging about \$16.74 per hour in 2024.

This workforce is predominantly comprised nearly of women and people of color [14]:

- 75% of family childcare (FCC) educators identify as Hispanic females
 - 42% of FCC educators are between the ages of 51 and 60
- 69% of center-based educators identify as White, Non-Hispanic females
- 18.4% receive Medicaid or Medicare assistance
- 9% receive SNAP assistance

It is unjust to ask historically marginalized groups to continue to bear the weight of our society on their shoulders while continuing to underpay and undervalue their labor.

Public Health Benefits of Supporting H-7317

By passing H-7317, Rhode Island can:

- **Enhance child outcomes:** Stable, supported educators foster higher-quality learning environments, which are foundational to healthy development.
- **Reduce health disparities:** Quality early education mitigates the lifelong impact of poverty and systemic inequality.
- **Promote community wellness:** Education and public health are inextricably linked; investing in early learning leads to healthier, more resilient communities.

We cannot build resilient early education systems without valuing the very people who make them possible. It is unfair to infants and toddlers to jeopardize their development and education because we've failed to retain the workforce that supports them.

How can we ask our children to value education if we don't demonstrate how we value educators - the very people who carry that knowledge?

Conclusion

My three younger siblings and I were fortunate enough to have attended Head Start. As a first-generation student, I entered preschool with no knowledge of English and with parents who were unfamiliar with the American school system.

However, thanks to my early childhood educator, Ms. Lopez, I didn't fall behind. Her one-on-one translation allowed me to learn English while simultaneously helping my mom understand exactly what was needed for us to succeed. If Ms. Lopez hadn't been there to support me during my first year in school, I honestly don't know where I would be today; her guidance is what prepared me for an elementary school that lacked ESL classes.

Students deserve educators like Ms. Lopez, and educators like Ms. Lopez deserve to be paid a living wage.

I respectfully implore **your consideration and passage H-7317**.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jocelyn Antonio, MPH

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