

Early Educator Staffing Crisis 2026
RI Early Educator Workforce Act
H-7317 (Donovan) & S-2369 (Urso)
Child Care for Child Care Educators Program
H-7319 (Diaz) & S-2085 (DiMario)



Right from the Start

High-quality early childhood programs have effective educators who provide nurturing care and enriching learning opportunities to support young children's rapid brain development. Rhode Island continues to experience a significant child care staffing crisis due to low wages.

Child care educators make among the lowest occupational wages in Rhode Island @ \$16.74 per hour in 2024 and below the average wage for a child care educator in nearby states -- Massachusetts (\$19.88/hour), Vermont (\$18.93/hour), New York (\$18.37), and Connecticut (\$17.50/hour). Rhode Island **child care programs close classrooms or limit enrollment, particularly for infants and toddlers, because they can't find qualified and caring staff to work for the wages offered.** 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.

RI Early Educator Workforce Act: This bill would establish a new section of state law that acknowledges the importance of the early educator workforce and codifies **effective strategies helping Rhode Island's child care and early learning programs attract, develop, and retain qualified and caring staff.** It establishes both the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Workforce Development program and the RI Early Childhood Registered Apprenticeship program in state law.

It allocates \$1 million in general revenue to continue the national Child Care WAGE\$ program in Rhode Island. **The Child Care WAGE\$ program provides significant wage supplements** (currently ranging from \$1,500/year for a CDA credential to \$6,000/year for a bachelor's degree in early childhood education) **to credentialed early educators who earn \$23/hour or less.** Child Care WAGE\$ has been shown to dramatically improve staff retention and the quality of care available to children.

CHILD CARE
WAGE\$[®]
— RHODE ISLAND —
A Program of Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children

Level 1*	National CDA credential OR 3 college credits in early childhood education	\$1500
Level 2*	12 or more college credits in early childhood education	\$2500
Level 3*	36 college credits, including 12 or more credits in early childhood education OR Associate's degree with 3-11 credits in early childhood education	\$3000
Level 4*	Associate's degree with 12 or more college credits in early childhood education OR Bachelor's degree with 3-11 credits in early childhood education	\$4000
Level 5	Associate's degree with 24 credits in early childhood education OR Bachelor's degree with 12-23 credits in early childhood education	\$5000
Level 6	Bachelor's degree with 24 or more credits in early childhood education	\$6000

*Temporary Level of Education: Participants must advance to a higher level as noted on the scale in order to remain eligible. Deadlines are shared with individual participants as applicable.



RI Child Care for Child Care Educators: In August 2023, [Rhode Island launched a Child Care for Child Care Educators pilot program modeled on a successful program in Kentucky](#) to attract and retain frontline child care staff by covering the cost of child care for their children. The program has made a big difference in helping child care programs attract and retain staff and has been continued through FY28. However, the number of approved active participants declined 35% from 570 child care educators (with 831 children) in October 2024 to 368 child care educators (with 558 children) in September 2025.

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.** As the state minimum wage has increased, many families are earning more money but not enough to afford the cost of quality child care. **Increasing or removing the family income limit (to match the Kentucky model) would help more child care programs attract and retain educators.** A new requirement implemented in August 2025, requires child care educators to participate in child support enforcement which is another major barrier that should be removed.

