



Testimony Re: House Bill 7317 Early
Educator Workforce Act
House Finance Committee
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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.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign would like to voice their strong support for House Bill 7317, the *Early Educator Workforce Act*, which would establish a new section of state law that acknowledges the importance of the early educator workforce and codify 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. The bill also establishes a \$1 million minimum funding level for the Child Care WAGE\$ program model to keep frontline early educators working and support the working parents, young children, and our economy.

High quality early childhood programs have qualified, caring, and effective educators who provide nurturing care and enriching learning opportunities to support the development of young children, but Rhode island continues to experience a significant child care staffing crisis due to low wages.

The Child Care WAGE\$ program provides substantial wage supplements to qualified early educators who earn less than **\$23/hour that range from \$1,500/year for an individual with an entry level CDA national credential to \$6,000/year for an individual with a bachelor's degree**. These wage supplements help to ensure that qualified and skilled early educators can remain working in the programs that helped them earn their credentials and gain valuable skills they need to promote the learning and development of infants, toddlers, and young children. Child Care WAGE\$ has been shown to dramatically improve staff retention and the quality of care available to children.

Currently, and for many years, early childhood programs have faced a staffing crisis and had 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 were closed because they cannot find and keep qualified staff.**

Many early educators, **almost all of whom are women, and many of whom 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.

We are grateful to Representative Donovan for sponsoring this important legislation and working to ensure that Rhode Island has **a qualified and caring early educator workforce** and we strongly urge the committee to pass this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

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

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|----------|---|--------|
| 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.

