



Rhode Island Association for the  
Education of Young Children



Right from the  
Start

Dear Chairperson Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

My name is Lisa Hildebrand, and I am the Executive Director of the RI Association for the Education of Young Children and a member of the Right from the Start Steering Committee. I am writing to express my **strong support for House Bill 8351**, the Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act.

I had the privilege of serving as a member of the Blue Ribbon Commission, a diverse group of education and community leaders convened by the Rhode Island Foundation and guided by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University. Four of the eight organizations leading the Right from the Start Campaign were members of the Blue Ribbon Commission.

We are particularly excited that the proposal addresses inadequate funding and systems to screen, evaluate, and deliver early childhood special education services required under the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. **The current system provides no funding for screening, evaluation, or preschool special education.**

Access to developmental screenings, eligibility evaluations, and services vary significantly by the city/town where children live, with children in higher poverty communities being less likely to receive a screening, less likely to be evaluated, less likely to be determined eligible for services, and less likely to receive their IDEA services in an inclusive early childhood setting.

Early Childhood Components of the bills include:

- 1. Fund a statewide developmental screening system to ensure all children ages 3, 4, and 5 get screened** to identify children who may be eligible for early childhood special education services. In 2024-2025, school districts completed developmental screenings for only 39% of children ages 3-5. As a result, many children who need preschool special education services are not identified.
- 2. Includes preschoolers receiving special education services in a community setting and in RI Pre-K classrooms in a district's average daily membership which will provide additional dollars to school districts for the delivery of early childhood special education services** for qualified children from age three up to kindergarten entry, regardless of setting. School districts have a legal obligation to provide preschool special education services; however, they currently do not receive explicit funding for these services in the funding formula. These funds would **support service delivery in public school settings as well as in community-based settings** such as RI Pre-K, Head Start, child care programs, and other out-of-district settings.
- 3. Establish a separate commission to design a unified early childhood education and care system** for children from birth through age five (5) years. The early childhood system directly affects school districts in many ways. Creating a more comprehensive and higher quality early childhood

education system for young children across the state would pay substantial dividends in helping districts better serve the children who enroll in kindergarten after they turn age 5.

This legislation offers a path forward. These recommendations were not developed in isolation. They are the product of a rigorous, inclusive process. The members of the Commission did not agree on every detail from the start. But through honest conversation and a shared commitment to Rhode Island's children, we arrived at a consensus vision. I stand behind these recommendations alongside my fellow Commission members, and I urge this committee to recognize the significance of that unity.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape how Rhode Island funds its public schools. Our students and communities cannot afford to wait. I respectfully urge the members of this committee to move this legislation forward and take this important step toward building a school funding system that is fair, transparent, and effective for every child in Rhode Island.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for your consideration of this important legislation. I welcome any questions and am happy to provide additional information.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "L. Hildebrand", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Lisa A. Hildebrand