



Testimony Re: H-7319 Child Care for Child Care Educators

House Finance Committee

May 14, 2026

**Michaela Carroll, MPH, Senior Policy Associate
for Early Childhood Education, Development, & Health**



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 will help families with young children.

Both Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign strongly support Representative Grace Diaz's Child Care for Child Care Educators bill, H-7319, which would expand and update a proven program that is helping to recruit and retain staff in child care and early learning programs. We strongly support the proposal to expand the program to allow higher income early educators to participate (as is done in Kentucky) and remove the sunset date so the program can continue to support child care educators.

We would like to thank the General Assembly for passing the pilot Child Care for Child Care Educators in 2023. The Department of Human Services quickly launched the program in August 2023 and it has been a remarkable success. Almost half of the licensed early learning centers and about 5% of the licensed family child care homes in the state had at least one staff member participating. This strategy Kentucky established to cover the cost of child care for all child care staff has also been recommended by the federal government and the National Association for the Education of Young Children to help address the staffing crises in child care and early learning programs.

Rhode Island has gotten national attention for adopting this strategy as a pioneering state and comments from child care educators have been overwhelmingly positive:

- “We have gotten many more applicants who are looking to bring their child with them to work. It has really given us an opportunity to appropriately staff our center.”
- “This has been life changing for parents with small children to go back to work. We have truly benefited from this program as staff want to stay and work where their child attends.”
- “This has been an amazing experience. We were able to attract a top notch toddler teacher who had chosen to stay home because the cost of child care was too high in comparison to her income.”

- “This pilot program is financially supporting our staff with young children, allowing them to work in a field that otherwise does not pay well. They are full of energy and a great asset to our program. I hope this program will continue to support the staff so they will continue to work in childcare.”

House Bill 7319 would make this successful program permanent and raise the family income limit to eighty-five percent of state median income to waive any copayment to help more middle-income staff receive the benefit (Kentucky does not have a family income limit in their program). Almost 75% of the approved applicants for the program are single mothers. Many of the applications from households with two working parents have been denied because they are over the family income limit of 300% of the federal poverty level. As the state minimum wage has increased and continues to increase, many families are earning more money, but not enough to afford the cost of quality child care.

The federal government has clearly stated that federal Child Care Development Block Grant funds can be used to fund this benefit for child care and early educators who are part of families that exceed the current family income federal limit (85% of State Median Income) – by considering early educators as a “protected population” and reviewing each case to determine that child care is not affordable to the family (e.g., would consume more than 7% of family income).

Enabling staff with higher family incomes to qualify for this benefit would directly help child care programs. Child care and early learning programs shouldn't have to search only for individuals in low-income families to staff child care programs. **Programs should not be incentivized to keep staff wages low so teachers with children can qualify. Instead, child care programs should recruit and retain the best qualified educators regardless of their family income.**

Rhode Island continues to experience a significant child care staffing crisis due to low wages, and ending the Child Care for Child Care Educators program will make staffing challenges worse. **We know that 9 out of 10 families in Rhode Island cannot afford the cost of quality child care – we should start with making sure the staff of our early childhood programs get the help they need so they can come to work every day to care for and educate other people's children.**

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony and for Representative Diaz's leadership on this issue.

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.

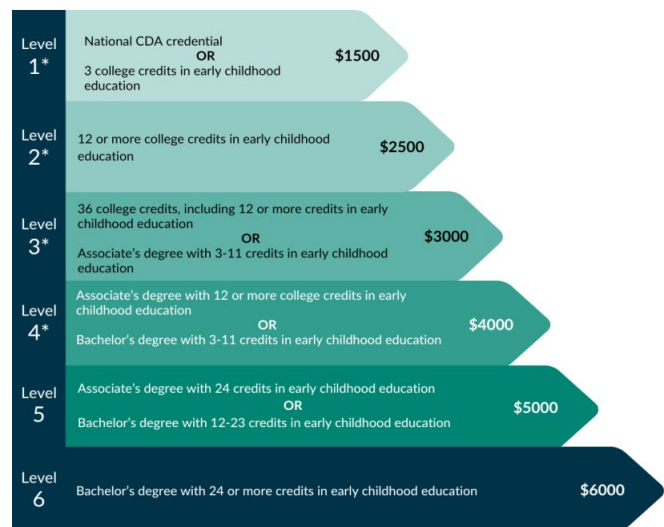
Child care educators make among the lowest occupational wages in Rhode Island @ \$16.74 per hour in 2024 and below the average wage for a child care educator in nearby states -- Massachusetts (\$19.88/hour), Vermont (\$18.93/hour), New York (\$18.37), and Connecticut (\$17.50/hour). Rhode Island **child 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



*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.

