



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: S-2173 – Certification of Child Care and Youth-Serving Workers and Operators

Senate Labor & Gaming Committee

March 4, 2026

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports passage of Senator Acosta's bill, S-2173, which would require the state to offer free comprehensive background checks for an individual applying for a job in a licensed child care, early learning, or out-of-school time setting to cover the cost of the required comprehensive background check. The RI Department of Human Services has been covering the cost of these background checks through the RI Attorney General's Office since 2021. This policy is scheduled to expire on June 30, 2026.

Passage of this bill would help to address the severe staffing crisis in the child care, early learning, and out-of-school time field which is causing programs to close classrooms and creating long waiting lists for children to enroll in programs. The staffing crisis also causes safety problems for children when ratios cannot be maintained or when there are high levels of staff turnover which means staff do not know individual children. The workforce that supports young children's early learning and development is made up almost exclusively of women (and disproportionately women of color) and has among the lowest wages in the state @ \$16.74 per hour for child care educators in May 2024 – among the lowest average wage for any occupation in the state.

Comprehensive background checks are required for individuals working in licensed child care settings, including early learning programs like Head Start and RI Pre-K and out-of-school time programs. Anyone who is involved in a child's care or supervision of children or who may have unsupervised access to children must have clean background checks on file. This includes bus drivers, kitchen staff, janitors, and administrative employees. Licensed family child care providers must also ensure that all adults who live in a family child care home have a clean background check on file.

Comprehensive background checks include:

- State criminal and sex offender registries
- State child abuse and neglect registry
- National Crime Information Center (run by the FBI)
- FBI fingerprint check
- National Sex Offender Registry (run by the Department of Justice)

Staff can begin working at a licensed child care facility before all pieces of the federal background check are completed but they cannot be left alone with children and must be supervised at all times by a staff member who has

successfully completed the background check. Comprehensive background check must be completed at least once every 5 years.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT urges passage of this bill to help address the staffing crisis in child care, early learning, and out-of-school time programs so that more children and families have access to licensed, quality programs.