



Testimony Re: S-2678 Relating to State Affairs and Government – The Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning
Senate Education Committee
March 30, 2022
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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports S-2678, which would establish a new Cabinet-Level Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning.

We strongly support the language in the bill that clearly indicates the commitment to managing child care and preschool licensing, child care subsidy, Head Start collaboration, and RI Pre-K by focusing on:

- Program quality, availability, and affordability. We appreciate the efforts to build on the state's common quality improvement ladder (BrightStars, the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System),
- Early educator workforce recruitment, development, advancement, and retention.
- Children's learning and development, including the implementation of a statewide, developmentally appropriate plan to use common assessment tools to understand and promote children's learning.

We propose the following suggestions to strengthen the bill:

- 1) Add language to ensure the new Office has sufficient resources and authority to do its work including:
 - Authority and resources to hire qualified and effective staff to manage statewide programs and accountability systems
 - Authority over child care subsidy policy (provider rates, family eligibility, family copayments, and provider payment practices) to meet or exceed federal CCDBG requirements.
 - Authority over child care and preschool program licensing to meet or exceed federal CCDBG requirements and national licensing benchmarks (including at least one unannounced inspection per year with inspection reports posted on a public website).
 - Authority over RI Pre-K program policy (quality standards to meet nationally recognized NIEER standards, funding amount per child, contracting, compensation of RI Pre-K teachers).
 - Resources to purchase/develop and maintain high-quality data systems from qualified vendors.
 - Resources to develop and manage effective, coordinated, on-going communications with families, community-based programs, public schools, and frontline early educators.
 - Legal counsel to support program licensing and program and vendor contracts.
- 2) Add language to make it clear that the Office will be responsible for licensing child care serving children from **birth through age 16** (current child care licensing statute age range) and administering the Child Care Assistance Program which serves children from **birth through age 12**.

3) The bill does not currently mention infants, toddlers, or school-age children, which account for about 64% of the children in the Child Care Assistance Program. **Add language to make it clear that the Office will be responsible for improving the quality, availability and affordability of infant and toddler child care (ages 0-2), preschool child care (ages 3 to 5) and child care for school-age children (currently defined as children ages 6 through 12+ by CCAP)** in addition to efforts to coordinate preschool child care with RI Pre-K.

4) **Add language to make the Office responsible for ensuring that children, ages birth through 12, with developmental delays and disabilities have access to child care and early learning programs that meet their families' needs.** The Office must have strong partnerships with the Early Intervention program (IDEA Part C) managed by EOHHS and the preschool special education system (IDEA Part B, Section 619) managed by RIDE. The Office should also have authority over policy for the KIDSCONNECT program managed by EOHHS that provides some supports to help children with Medicaid Insurance that have behavioral, developmental, or specials needs participate in child care, Head Start, and RI Pre-K.

5) **Add specific language to make the Office responsible for developing and implementing strategies to ensure educators in child care (birth through age 12, including centers and family child care), RI Pre-K and Head Start have the qualifications, skills, knowledge, and compensation to promote learning and development of children.** The Office should oversee planning and funding to support educators along a career pathway, including funding workforce development and retention efforts such as the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood and the Child Care WAGE\$ program. The Office must have a strong partnership with the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner and the RI Department of Education to remove barriers and provide supports needed to ensure early educators can earn state and national credentials (including the nationally-recognized CDA and state credentials for infant/toddler educators and program administration credential that are common in other states) that carry college credits toward degrees, that working educators can make steady progress toward earning degrees, and that community-based, full-time working early educators can earn Pre-K to Grade 3 state teacher certification.

6) **Add specific language to make the Office responsible for ensuring the state has a high-functioning State Advisory Council on Early Care and Education** as required under federal law and that advice is sought from the Council before key decisions are made.

7) **Add specific language to make the Office responsible for developing and submitting applications and overseeing federal funds awarded to the state through competitive or through formula grants to improve children's access to high-quality child care and early learning programs** (such as the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant, the Preschool Development grant, and the PDG Birth to 5 grant).

We very enthusiastically support this proposal and thank Senator Gallo for her leadership in introducing this bill. Each year, more states across the

country have created cabinet-level offices to oversee child care and preschool, including both our neighboring states – Connecticut and Massachusetts. **At a recent meeting of the Rhode Island Early Learning Council, we heard from several program leaders that a cabinet-level office would be “transformational” for the field and will be a visible recognition of the importance of high-quality early care and education for children and families and for the professionals who work in this field.**