



**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**

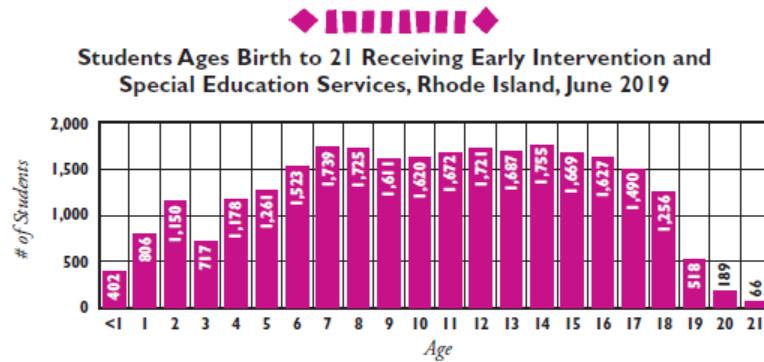
ONE UNION STATION  
 PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903  
 401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

**Testimony Re: Senate Bill 454 Re: Ombudsperson  
 Senate Education Committee  
 April 14, 2021  
 Paige Clausius-Parks, Senior Policy Analyst**

Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for Senate Bill 454 which would establish the Rhode Island ombudsperson for special education to ensure school districts meet minimum standards to comply with individualized education plans (IEPs) for students with disabilities. This act would also direct that families be provided forms to evaluate their level of confidence and satisfaction with the school's special education process and that informational pamphlets be provided that include information on the services provided and contact information.

The federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* guarantees a free appropriate public education to every child with a disability. Prior to passage of the original 1975 federal law, many children with disabilities were excluded from public school. Since passage, outcomes for children with disabilities have steadily improved, however, concerns remain that not all children who could benefit from services are identified, that children of color are less likely to receive special education services than their White peers, and special education funding is not adequate.

Despite improvements in high school graduation rates and post-secondary school enrollment, students with disabilities are still less likely to graduate from high school and more likely to be suspended than students without disabilities. In Rhode Island, students with disabilities are much less likely to meet or exceed expectations on the *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)*. In 2019, only 6% of students in grades 3 to 8 with a disability met or exceeded expectations in ELA and 5% in math compared with 44% in ELA and 34% in math among students without special education needs.



Source: Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Center for Child and Family Health, Early Intervention enrollment, June 30, 2019. Rhode Island Department of Education, Office of Diverse Learners, Special Education Census, June 30, 2019. Includes parentally-placed students.

As of June 2019, there were 21,868 students ages six to 21 receiving special education services through Rhode Island public schools.

Rhode Island's new accountability system under the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* is structured to promote collective responsibility for continuous improvement at all levels of education. In Rhode Island in the 2018-2019 school year, 158 schools were identified as being in need of Targeted Support and Improvement. **Of these 158 schools, 117 had one or more student subgroups who performed at the lowest levels in the state. Of these schools, 88% were identified because of the need for improvement for students with disabilities.**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lost instruction time caused by school closures, the challenges of distance learning, and the social-emotional stresses of the pandemic are expected to result in significant loss of academic progress, especially among students with disabilities. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports efforts to improve the educational services and opportunities for students with disabilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.