



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: S-2679 Relating to Human Services – Early Learning Hubs

Senate Education Committee

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports S-2679, which requires the Department of Human Services to establish “Early Learning Hubs” by holding an open competition and contracting with regional partners to coordinate support for early learning providers in the delivery of early childhood care and education. **We recommend consideration of this regional approach as a Phase 2 Priority after the state Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning is created and significant funds are allocated to support child care and Pre-K, including resources to increase the compensation of early educators.**

Currently and historically, the biggest barrier to the delivery of high-quality child care and preschool is the lack of program operating funds and low compensation and high staff turnover endemic to the field.

Meeting quality standards and even basic health and safety standards in licensing regulations is very difficult for providers when they don’t have enough resources to pay attract and retain effective educators.

Many years of professional development and technical assistance offered to programs has helped some community-based child care and preschool programs make strong advancement so they can compete for better funding. When RI Pre-K or Head Start operational funding is available, those programs that can secure a contract can accelerate their progress. However, we have many programs who have not been able to make quality advancements, because:

- they do not have enough resources to offer competitive wages and benefits for staff
- they are located in communities that have not been prioritized for Head Start and RI Pre-K operating funds
- they are family child care providers who are more isolated from community supports because they work long hours by themselves without a supervisor or administrative structure and are not able to compete for Head Start or RI Pre-K operating funds. Many family child care providers in Rhode Island also do not speak, read, or write in English.

We offer the following suggestions to improve the bill:

1) Include language to specify that the Early Learning Hubs will be responsible for supporting early childhood programs to improve quality by meeting benchmarks in the state’s valid and reliable Quality Rating and Improvement System for child care and early learning programs.

2) Include language that each Early Learning Hub will operate in partnership, seek advice and direction from, and promote program participation and use of statewide systems that support program

quality improvement including the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System, the Center for Early Learning Professionals, the SEIU Education and Support Fund, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, Project SUCCESS, and the RI Child Care and Early Learning Facilities Fund.

Regional infrastructure works in many larger states because it is coordinated around a set of statewide goals and systems, (e.g. [Pennsylvania's Early Learning Resource Centers](#), [North Carolina's Smart Start](#), and [Vermont's Building Bright Futures regions](#)).

3) In the future, consider incorporating a regional approach to the delivery of preschool special education, by expanding the RI Department of Education's itinerant early childhood special education model across cities and towns in larger regions so that families can select the community-based early learning programs that meet their needs and children can receive IDEA services even if they are enrolled in a program that is not located inside their district of residence. This will not be easy to do, but it is really important strategy to consider as we move toward universal access to Head Start and Pre-K for all three- and four-year-olds in the state.

4) In the future, consider using a regional approach to kindergarten transition and supporting coordination and alignment across the birth to Grade 3 systems for curriculum selection and implementation, child assessment, professional development, developing and managing substitute pools, peer learning, and planning for program development.

We very much support the idea of regional hubs to support community-based child care and early learning providers but urge thoughtful coordination with state systems for child care, Head Start, and RI Pre-K that can best be managed through a new cabinet-level Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning.