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Testimony Re: Article 10, Sections 1-5 and Section 8, Regarding Education

House Finance Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for **Article 10, Section 1** related to changes in the funding formula **to support RI Pre-K** expansion and sustainability, additional support for **multilingual learners** and support to increase the number of **mental health professionals at public schools**.

RI Pre-K

High quality early childhood education is one of the most effective ways to break the cycle of poverty and ensure that all children have the opportunity to thrive. Research by Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman has found that the rate of return on investment in early childhood development can be up to 13 percent per child per year, due to improved outcomes in education, health, sociability and economic productivity. The Governor's plan is not only good for children – it is good for Rhode Island's economy and future prosperity.

Kindergarten teachers will tell you that they can tell immediately which of their students have had high quality preschool prior to Kindergarten entry and which have not. The Governor's proposal of expanding high quality Pre-K to every 4-year-old whose family wants it is a very wise investment as we work as a state to improve academic outcomes for all students.

School-Based Mental Health Professionals

Mental health influences children's health and behavior at home, in school, and in the community. Mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, prevent or affect academic achievement, increase involvement with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, diminish family incomes, and increase the risk for suicide.

In Rhode Island, one in five (19.0%) children ages six to 17 has a diagnosable mental health problem; one in ten (9.8%) has significant functional impairment. In Rhode Island more than one-third (36%) of children ages three to 17 who needed mental health treatment or counseling had a problem obtaining needed care.

According to the 2019 Rhode Island Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 76% of high school students reported having at least one day in the past month where their mental health

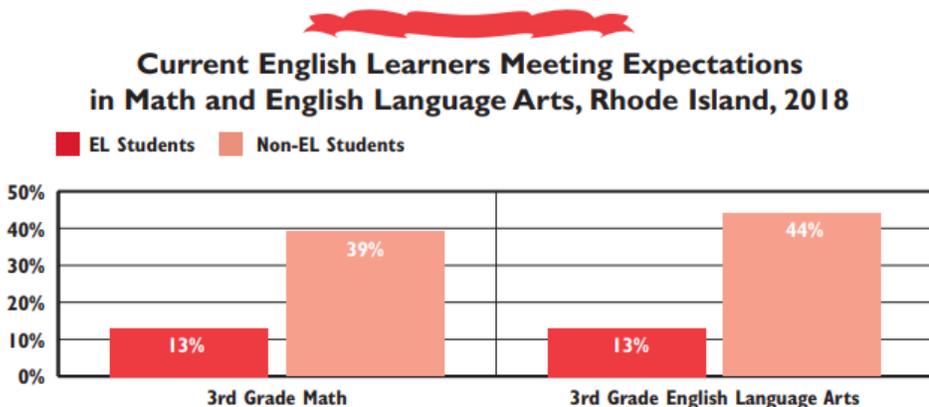
was not good. More than one in three (32%) Rhode Island high school students reported feeling so sad or hopeless for two or more weeks that they stopped doing some normal activities and one in seven (15%) reported attempting suicide one or more times during the past year.

We support the Governor’s proposed expansion of the qualifying expenditures of the School Resource Officer Categorical Aid to include the hiring of new mental health professionals in schools. These investments will help ensure the safety and physical and emotional well-being of our children.

Multilingual Learners (MLL)

Reading proficiency in third grade is a key predictor of school success and high school graduation. Research shows that children who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers. Currently, only 48% of third graders in Rhode Island are meeting expectations for reading.

In order to achieve the state’s goal, we need to tackle disparities in access to high-quality learning opportunities. MLL students need additional supports in order to achieve proficiency in reading. In 2018, only 13% of MLL students were reading on grade level in third grade.



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)*, October 2018.

Dual language bilingual programs can significantly improve English reading proficiency, decrease high school dropout rates, increase the likelihood of going to college, and improve economic outcomes for MLL students. During the 2017-2018 school year, bilingual and two-way/dual language programs were offered in the Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence and South Kingstown school districts, Rhode Island School for the Deaf and at the International Charter School.

The majority of the world’s population is bilingual or multilingual. High-quality dual language bilingual education, starting in the early grades or in preschool, effectively promotes English language acquisition and proficiency while also building proficiency in a child’s native

language. **Being bilingual is associated with increased economic and social opportunities and improved executive function skills that contribute to academic success.** Bilingualism is also associated with a delay or prevention of cognitive challenges that are connected to aging.

In the 2017-2018 school year, MLL students were 9% (12,464) of total students, and 34% of all MLL students in Rhode Island were in grades preschool to grade three. Successful programs for multilingual students have highly qualified and culturally competent teachers.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports efforts to expand children's access to high-quality dual language bilingual programs and to increase capacity of the educators who serve them.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports Article 10, Section 2 which would make changes to the section of the General Laws entitled "Educational Services to Very Young Children" to change the focus on programs serving children ages 2 through six to focusing on programs that serve children ages four through six in public schools or private early learning programs that are not part of nonpublic elementary school system. The change also makes the state approval process voluntary. Since DHS is now responsible for licensing all private child care and early learning programs in the state for children ages 0 through 12, participation in the state's BrightStars Quality Rating and Improvement System is required for RI Pre-K program this change makes sense.

As a member of the **steering committee of the Right from the Start Campaign**, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports the governor's proposal to expand the state's high-quality RI Pre-K program as detailed in **Article 10, Section 3 with the goal of universal, voluntary access for all four-year-olds and providing \$7.5 million for expansion in FY21.**

The RI Pre-K program is one of just three programs in the nation that meets all ten of the quality benchmarks the National Institute for Early Education at Rutgers. Rhode Island is also one of only 5 states that has a salary parity policy for the Pre-K, with RI Pre-K teachers, no matter where they work, paid wages equivalent to Kindergarten teachers.

The General Assembly passed the Rhode Island Pre-Kindergarten Act in 2008 establishing a need to expand access to high-quality early childhood education programs to address opportunity gaps in early learning that result in many children entering kindergarten 18 months behind their peers. The Act required state agencies to work together with advocates, school districts, Head Start, and child care programs to develop a high-quality Pre-K demonstration project that builds on the existing infrastructure in the state so that Pre-K could be delivered using a mixed delivery system by child care programs, Head Start, and public schools. **The plan for high-quality Pre-K included both 3- and 4-year-olds but started by serving 4-year-olds** and focused expansion in communities with low performing schools.

Our state has remained strongly committed to these high-quality, research-based standards for Pre-K and to a diverse delivery system. As of the 2019-2020 school year, there were 78

RI Pre-K classrooms in Rhode Island with a total of 1,420 children enrolled; 45% of the classrooms were operated by Head Start agencies, 31% were operated by child care programs, and 24% were operated by public schools.

Families who want to enroll in RI Pre-K submit apply through a **state-supervised lottery that is stratified by income to ensure economically integrated classrooms** that prioritizes low-income children for enrollment based on the prevalence in the local community. Families can select the RI Pre-K sites that they are interested in attending. As of the 2019-2020 school year, **71% of the children in RI Pre-K were from low-income families** and 29% were from higher income families.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT support all the key elements of the Governor's plan, including:

- Maintaining a commitment to meeting high quality, **research-based standards** for Pre-K, including highly-qualified and well-compensated teachers that receive high-quality professional development and coaching.
- Building on the existing infrastructure in the state and maintaining a strong **diverse delivery system** for Pre-K, including child care programs, Head Start agencies, and public schools.
- A plan to improve and expand **early childhood facilities as high quality learning environments** and support the development of **strong Pre-K teachers** and teaching assistants.
- Improving **transitions to kindergarten** and promoting coordination and **alignment of Pre-K with K-3 education**.
- Investing in **early childhood data systems** so we can understand children's enrollment patterns, including which children are getting high-quality Pre-K and which children aren't.
- Making **concurrent investments in the child care system** to improve quality for children starting at birth and developing a pipeline of programs that can deliver Pre-K that meets the needs of working families.

In Article 10, Section 5, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT recommends retaining statutory language about a plan to serve 3-year-olds in Pre-K and to strengthening early care and learning programs for infants and toddlers. Research shows that the learning and opportunity gaps start in infancy and the quality of infant/toddler programs are essential for school readiness. Research also shows that two years of Pre-K is better than one year. There are currently 30 states that include some 3-year-olds in State Pre-K. The federal Head Start program serves 3- and 4-year-olds (with Early Head Start serving children starting at birth) and the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires states to provide special education services to all children starting at birth with school districts serving children starting at age 3.

We also support **Article 10, Section 8 – The Rhode Island Early Childhood Care and Education Capital Fund Act**, which establishes a capital fund as a competitive grant program to improve and expand community-based early learning program facilities administered by the Rhode Island Department of Human Services. Child care and early learning facilities are aging, have inadequate resources to make improvement, and have very limited resources to expand. More than half of the buildings that house early learning programs in the state are in poor condition.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly urge your support for Article 10.
Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.