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**Testimony Re: H-7271, Rhode Island Early Educator Investment Act**

**House Health, Education & Welfare Committee**

**March 4, 2020**

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

As a member of the **steering committee of the Right from the Start Campaign**, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports **H-7271** which calls for the development of a plan to close the gap between what early educators earn and what kindergarten teachers earn.

High-quality early childhood programs have effective educators who know how to work with children and families to **support young children's rapid brain development**. However, many early educators earn wages that are at the bottom of the occupational ladder (\$12/hour for child care teachers in Rhode Island). Effective professionals are leaving the field for better paying jobs. Rhode Island needs to establish state goals and find solutions that will attract and retain skilled, qualified, diverse educators in essential programs to ensure children get a strong start in school and life and maintain Rhode Island's healthy economy today and tomorrow.

Rep. Casimiro's bill calls for the **development of a cross-departmental target wage scale for early educators**, including professionals who work in child care programs (both centers and family child care) licensed and partially funded through the Child Care Assistance Program by the RI Department of Human Services, family home visiting programs funded and overseen by the RI Department of Health, and Early Intervention programs certified, overseen, and partially funded by the RI Executive Office of Health and Human Services. The bill asks the state to consider the wage scale developed by the **Rhode Island Moving the Needle on Compensation Task Force (see attached)**, which ensures early educators are paid comparable wages to similarly qualified kindergarten teachers.

The bill also requires the state to **design strategies and estimate the cost to close the gap between current wages and the target wage scale**. We would like to see the state improve the rates for the Child Care Assistance Program to meet state standards, and because middle income families without subsidies cannot afford to pay more for child care, develop additional strategies to improve compensation for child care teachers so we can retain effective educators in child care programs, particularly programs serving infants and toddlers. We recommend the state pilot and then expand a wage supplement for child care teachers like 15 states already do. This wage supplement would be managed by an intermediary organization and tied to education levels and demonstration of effective practices.

We recommend that the state improve funding and accountability for family home visiting programs so that effective family home visitors are recognized and compensated appropriately for the critical role they play in getting pregnant and parenting families off to the right start.

We recommend that the state increase rates paid to Early Intervention programs based on the cost to attract, develop and retain effective Early Intervention professionals with a common wage scale. As I understand it, the rates for Early Intervention programs have not been increased in about 20 years

Currently, programs face a staffing crisis and have a “hole in the bucket” spending very limited resources recruiting and training new staff who often leave for higher paying jobs. One child care program recently told me that 80% of their teachers leave each year.

Many early educators struggle to afford the cost of housing and food and have few supports and incentives to improve their education or skills.

Children and families ultimately pay the cost of this workforce crisis as the improved outcomes associated with participating in high-quality early childhood programs depend on stable and strong relationships between children, families and skilled professionals.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.