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Testimony Re: Article 10, Regarding Education

Senate 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 the early childhood components in **Article 10, including the allocation of \$7.5 million in state and federal funds to sustain and expand the RI Pre-K program** and the establishment of the **Rhode Island Early Childhood Care and Education Capital Fund**.

As we have entered a period of great economic uncertainty, it is **critically important to maintain our commitment** to investing in high quality early learning opportunities, including RI Pre-K, **state-funded Head Start (managed by DHS) and to allocate additional resources to the Child Care Assistance Program (managed by DHS)** to meet federal standards and increase wages for frontline child care staff.

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.

RI Pre-K was successfully delivered through remote instruction methods beginning on March 15, 2020. Should it become necessary to close schools again, we believe RI Pre-K can be delivered remotely and it will improve children's developing skills and knowledge and is an important support for Rhode Island families

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 and 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 and participation in the state's BrightStars Quality Rating and Improvement System is required for RI Pre-K programs, this change makes sense.

Article 10, Section 3: 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 four 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.

Article 10, Section 5: Rhode Island KIDS COUNT recommends **retaining statutory language about a plan to serve 3-year-olds in RI 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.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT also supports **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 urges your support for Article 10.
Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.