



Testimony Re: H-6494 Revised Appropriations for FY22, Child Care and Early Intervention ARPA funding for staffing crises

Senate Finance

October 27, 2021

Leanne Barrett, Senior Policy Analyst

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports the Governor's proposal to invest \$13 million in child care and \$5.5 million in Early Intervention to immediately address staffing crises that are preventing families with young children from accessing needed services.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a leader in the Right from the Start Campaign and we fully support the Campaign's recommendations to go beyond the Governor's proposal and invest significantly more APRA resources to help families access affordable, quality, child care now by:

- Providing larger wage enhancements, particularly for skilled and effective child care educators with credentials
- Providing \$20/week bonus payments to every provider serving infants and toddlers in the Child Care Assistance Program to prevent scheduled cuts in rates and to improve the availability of quality care statewide.
- Expand the Child Care Assistance Program to serve working families who make too much money to qualify for the program, don't earn enough to afford child care on their own, and need child care in order to work.

We have been working with Early Intervention providers in RI for the past 12 months to understand the extent of the financing and staffing challenges they are facing. The problems are severe and they are preventing infants and toddlers in the state from receiving needed services to address developmental delays and disabilities as required under the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*.

Early Intervention is part of our state and nation's commitment to public education – it starts at birth for infants/toddler with disabilities and developmental delays. Even before the pandemic, Early Intervention programs had unacceptably low wages and high staff turnover and more than 80% of Early Intervention staff, almost all of whom have a BA or higher, said they were not planning to remain working in the program very long because wages are too low and more than 50% were actively looking for a better paying job. The pandemic has made the staffing crisis much, much worse. In September, 5 of the 9 Early Intervention providers were closed for new referrals of families because they did not have enough staff.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT thanks the Governor for his leadership in submitting these proposals and focusing on the staffing crises. **We urge the General Assembly to take swift action to allocate sufficient funding to Early Intervention and child care to meet the immediate needs of families with young children. Affordable, reliable, quality child care is a fundamental engine for our economy so that parents can work and children can thrive.**

Selected Stories Collected on RI Child Care Staffing Crisis

Highly-Skilled Educators Are Key for High-Quality Child Care



East Providence resident Erin Thibeault teaches first grade in the East Providence Public Schools. Her four-year-old son attends child care at Meeting Street Early Learning Center in Providence while she and her husband are at work. Erin raves about the high quality learning environment at Meeting Street, which she sought out after a negative experience at a child care program her son previously attended.

After Erin became concerned about her son's development as an infant, the family began receiving services from Early Intervention that are designed to help infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities. Her son started in a child care program at 18 months, and EI specialists would regularly observe him in his child care classroom, providing recommendations to make the classroom experience more productive and enjoyable for him. **Ultimately, the child care staff at this program was not able to successfully implement the Early Intervention recommendations,** and Erin was forced to leave the program because they could not meet his needs.

"I saw the teachers at his old program visibly frustrated with his behavior. They didn't have the administrative support or specialized training to meet his needs, and they declined to implement simple recommendations from our EI specialists, such as not putting him at a table with more than three other children. They saw him as a kid who was acting out, and didn't know how to help him," said Erin. **"I was scared that we'd be asked to leave, and thought I was going to have to quit my job to stay home with him. I know of two other families who had a similar experience, so it's not uncommon."**

Erin says that after switching to Meeting Street, a completely different side of her son emerged. "On the first day they met him, they understood him—they realized he was a sensory seeker, who would benefit from boundaries and routines. They recognize when he's getting dysregulated and help him regulate. They have an awesome inclusion program and have helped him with peer relationships. It has made a world of difference," said Erin. "He's recently been diagnosed with ADHD, and without Meeting Street, I'm terrified to think what his trajectory could be."

Even with her degree in elementary education and her special education certification, Erin says it still took independent research, multiple conversations with their pediatrician, advice from a social worker, and months of meetings with various EI specialists to steer her in the right direction with her son's early learning. Erin recognizes that she had the knowledge to access resources and was not afraid to advocate for her son, and she wonders—what's happening to the children of families without the same advantages?

Erin believes that all teachers, including early childhood educators working in child care settings, must have the skills, knowledge, and resources to address the needs of all children so that every child has the opportunity to thrive in the classroom. Erin stresses that it's crucial that legislators and statewide leaders ensure child care programs receive the funding needed to attract and retain qualified and effective early childhood educators. Rhode Island child care licensing regulations currently require only a high school diploma to be a classroom teacher or family child care provider. Although the state has helped with scholarships for early childhood educators through several initiatives, it is difficult to keep skilled early educators in the child care field once they've completed their degree because compensation is so low (\$12.11 per hour on average in 2020).

Due to staffing challenges, Meeting Street has only been able to consistently stay open until 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. even though families request later pickup times due to

their work schedules. They may need to decrease their hours further if the staffing crisis continues, and they currently have 15 children waiting for classroom spots to open up. Without child care staff to accommodate families that need care, more working parents will struggle to find care during the hours they work to support their families.

Erin says that paying for child care has also been a struggle, and that tuition has consistently been equal to or higher than her housing costs. She's not sure she could afford to cover the costs of child care for a second child, even with her public school teacher salary combined with her husband's salary as a firefighter and ability to earn more by working overtime.

"I want our legislators and statewide leaders to know that every family needs and deserves access to high quality child care that meets the needs of their family. It's crucial to a functioning society," said Erin. "The child care payment model is flawed, and the full cost burden of child care cannot fall solely on hardworking parents who can't afford it. We cannot afford to pay more than we already are for child care and we desperately need child care educators to be adequately compensated for the critical work they do."

Family Child Care Providers Struggle with Low Pay, Hurdles to Career Advancement



Providence resident Estefany Ortiz opened her family child care after giving birth to her son in 2016. She had been working in a department store and starting a child care business was one of the only ways she could afford high quality care for her son. Although she loves the early childhood classroom she's created in her home and currently has a large waitlist of families, the road hasn't been easy. Today she runs her program with the help of a teaching assistant and an assistant-in-training, while she attends Rhode Island College, where **she's earning her bachelor's degree in early childhood education** through a state-sponsored T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarship.

“I’m actually losing income to complete school even though I have a scholarship, since I need to pay teachers to fill in for me at my program while I’m in classes. It’s extremely difficult to run my business and take classes at the same time,” she said. “Many child care providers are never able to finish their degrees because they think they won’t make back the time and money they’d invest into school. You wonder—is it worth the sacrifices to earn this degree that isn’t even required?”

Estefany’s program was recently closed for a week because of a COVID exposure. Since many of her families pay out of pocket for full tuition and needed their money to pay for an alternate child care option that week, she was not able to charge them for tuition while her program was closed. “I need to be flexible for my parents who are unable to work and losing wages when their children stay home,” said Estefany. “However, I couldn’t survive a month without being paid. If we had to quarantine for four weeks, I would be forced to close my doors for good.”

The pandemic heightened these unsustainable payment practices, and Estefany feels family child care providers have been left to fend for themselves. She says that in order to provide the high quality learning environments working parents depend on, family child care providers need support to further their professional development and education, and higher pay to make it possible and worthwhile. She believes that one of the biggest hurdles to better wages for family child care providers is the misconception that they’re just babysitters.

“I’m constantly correcting parents who come to me looking for a babysitter. Because my classroom is within my home, parents see it as lower quality than a child care center, and feel that it should cost significantly less,” said Estefany. “But the reality is that I’m offering a high quality learning environment that is intimate, personalized, and culturally relevant. I get to know all these kids personally, I’m tracking their development, and I’m coming up with personalized lessons and activities for each of them based on their interests. There isn’t the capacity to do that in all child care centers.”



Estefany is concerned that families don't recognize that investing in high quality early childhood learning pays off in the long run, and often seek out child care options based solely on affordability and convenience. "Parents must understand how important it is to learn school readiness skills, like waiting for your turn, socializing with peers, or holding scissors. Building these important skills at the right time will help build success in school and in life," she said. "If a child doesn't gain these skills at a young age, they'll have to work that much harder to catch up, and elementary school teachers likely won't have the time or capacity to get them up to speed. About 40 percent of kids in Providence perform below grade level when they start school because they haven't had a high quality early learning experience."

Estefany stresses that legislators and statewide leaders must prioritize making a variety of high quality childhood education options accessible for all families, by assuring child care workers are paid adequate, consistent wages so they can offer a high quality learning environment. She knows that in the long run, investments in early childhood pay off, because children who have high quality early learning experiences have a huge advantage over their peers throughout their k-12 education.