

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, December 7, 2022 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

RI Department of Administration, Room 2A

One Capital Hill, Providence

Meeting Summary

AGENDA SUMMARY

The Early Learning Council's agenda addressed the following topics:

- Welcome, Opening Remarks, and Meeting Overview
- Update: Pre-K Expansion Planning
- Update: Early Head Start/Head Start
- Update: Early Intervention
- Update: Family Home Visiting
- Update: Governor's Workforce Board Early Childhood Workforce Plan
- Update: Early Childhood Governance Planning/Role of Early Learning Council
- Announcements and Public comment

KEY POINTS

Key discussion points from the meeting are summarized below:

WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS, AND MEETING OVERVIEW

Director Kimberly Brito and Paige Clausius-Parks welcomed the Council. (See slides). The following comments were made:

- The Right From The Start campaign submitted priorities for the Rhode Island 2024 budget urging the governor to adopt a series of investments for early childhood education. The full letter is available at <https://rightfromthestartri.org>.
- The letter urges the governor to consider the following investments, among others:
 - Increasing the base provider rates for CCAP to the federal equal access standard
 - Lifting the family income entrance eligibility levels to 85% of the state median income
 - Removing parentage and child support requirements for CCAP eligibility
 - Enhancing the rates for programs serving infants under 18 months
 - Restoring the \$48 million in general revenue for childhood programs
 - Establishing statewide compensation goals for early childhood educators
 - Expanding strategies to help programs attract, develop, and retain qualified staff, including the establishment and funding of a childcare wages program
 - Restoring and expanding state funding for the Head Start program to prevent permanent closure of classrooms/loss of seats
 - Sustaining all current state Pre-K, Head Start, and Early Head Start seats
 - Addressing compensation to make sure all state Pre-K and Head Start teachers receive compensation on parity with comparably qualified K to 12 educators
 - Retaining a diverse delivery system as we continue to expand access for preschool children ages 3 and 4
 - Making First Connections' temporary Medicaid rate permanent

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- Addressing other investments related to paid family leave, children's health, increased benefit limits for RI Works, and implementation of equitable tax strategies in alignment with the Revenue for RI campaign

UPDATE: PRE-K EXPANSION PLANNING

Kayla Rosen updated the Council on RI Pre-K Expansion planning. (See slides.) The following comments and questions were made:

- Feedback on the draft expansion plan included comments on the whole early childhood education sector, but the report will be focused on RI Pre-K only. The plan cannot solve all early childhood system issues, but RI Pre-K is an important piece. However, all expansion efforts will be in line with the feedback and what would benefit the entire system.
- The state RI Pre-K program is charged with reaching 5000 seats by 2028.
- Q: What is the definition of "Pre-K" in the report? Does it include Head Start, center based care, and family child care homes?
A: The RI Pre-K program awards competitive contracts to public schools, child care centers, and Head Start agencies to deliver the RI Pre-K model to support children where they are receiving high quality early childhood education from our mixed delivery system. As we expand the system, we want to ensure that everyone has access to an RI Pre-K classroom, and that means including all the programs where early child care classrooms are located, such as Early Head Start, Head Start, center based care providers, and family child care homes. All these places will be included in the report.
- Q: Does the report include 3 year olds?
A: It absolutely does and there is a section that focuses specifically on how to include 3 year olds in RI Pre-K classrooms.
- Q: Where is the funding coming from for the expansion?
A: The report focuses on how much the expansion will cost, but not on the source of that revenue.
- COMMENT: If we combine all the Head Start seats for 3 and 4 year olds with the current RI Pre-K seats, then we are not too far off from our 5000 seat goal. However, we need to make sure that all those Head Start slots remain open and, also, that we maintain all of the current RI Pre-K seats. Stabilization of existing classrooms and seats is key to achieving our goal.
- Q: Family child care homes are concerned about the impact of RI Pre-K expansion to their income. Family child care homes are not currently part of the RI Pre-K program or Head Start, but half of their income is derived from 3 and 4 year olds. What can be done to address these concerns?
A: Family child care homes are an important part of the mixed delivery system for RI Pre-K in Rhode Island. We will figure out the right model for including family child care homes in the RI

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Pre-K program as it expands. It is one of the goals in the report. There are important connections between RI Pre-K providers and family child care homes. For example, not all RI Pre-K providers can support before and after school care, which family child care homes do particularly well. We all need to work together to support families. For that reason, we will keep the impact of RI Pre-K expansion at the forefront of our plans.

UPDATE: EARLY HEAD START /HEAD START

Mary Varr and Catherine Green presented an updated on Early Head Start and Head Start. (See slides). Key comments and questions included the following:

- A major tenet of Head Start is that it is inclusive of the whole family and responds specifically to individual community needs.
- What sets Head Start programs apart from other early care and education programs is that they provide high-quality preschool, infant/toddler classroom and home visiting learning opportunities, and comprehensive services to the most vulnerable children and families whose income is at or below the federal poverty level and/or are receiving public assistance – SNAP, SSI, RI Works or experiencing homelessness or involved in foster care. Head Start eligible families have been especially difficult to reach post-pandemic.
- Over the last 35 years, Rhode Island has recognized the importance and value of equity of access to high quality early childhood education through the investment of state dollars in the Head Start program.
- There has been an unprecedented rise in the need for mental health services post-pandemic.
- The Office of Head Start issued an Information Memorandum offering Head Start and Early Head Start grantees an opportunity to permanently reduce funded enrollment and slots while retaining the full grant so programs can increase compensation for its workforce. OHS recognizes the early educator workforce crisis and the need to attract and retain qualified staff through adequate compensation. Because funding is subject to government approval and has not increased to the levels needed to raise wages so they are competitive, the only option available to ensure higher compensation is to reduce slots. This memorandum is historic because even the current slots do not meet the needs of all eligible children. The current slots meet less than 30% of the need in Head Start and less than 10% of the need in Early Head Start.
- In Rhode Island, there is a waiting list for Head Start/Early Head Start because there is not enough staff to enroll those children and there has never been enough funding to serve all eligible children in Head Start or Early Head Start.

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- The 28 additional vacancies in staffing include critical members of the Head Start team, such as those providing mental health supports, which impacts the ability of programs to serve all the needs of children and families.
- Q: How will local Head Start agencies determine how to reduce slots?
A: The data from a community needs assessment reviewed by the federal Office of Head Start will determine where and how agencies can reduce slots in Rhode Island. Once agencies have a plan, they submit that request to the regional office for approval. Agencies do not want to reduce slots. It is devastating, especially as we are trying to sustain and expand the RI Pre-K program. However, that is how bad the workforce crisis is. Head Start staff get paid slightly more than the staff at a typical child care center, but not significantly more and they are still underpaid for the work they are expected to perform as part of the wrap around supports offered by Head Start programs.
- Q: Are there any guidelines from OHS on how to reduce the slots?
A: We are not to use a cost per child model because some children have more needs and, therefore, cost more. The community needs assessment will help determine how agencies could reduce the slots. The overarching goal is to achieve better wages for staff so Head Start and Early Head Start can attract and retain qualified staff for the remaining classrooms.
- COMMENT: We need to get this information to the people in the state making funding decisions. We need to advocate for more state funding to make sure Head Start programs are supported.
- COMMENT: For infant toddler care in the state, Early Head Start provides 85-90% of the high quality care available so reducing Early Head Start slots greatly reduces the amount of high quality infant toddler care offered in the state.
- COMMENT: This is both a federal problem and a state problem because it is our children and our teachers.

UPDATE: EARLY INTERVENTION

Jennifer Kaufman updated the Council on Early Intervention. Comments included:

- To help stabilize programs during the pandemic, all EI referrals were processed through EOHHS. Starting December 27th, the nine Early Intervention programs will all be accepting and processing their own referrals. Families already on the state list will be distributed to the nine programs.
- Early Intervention programs are doing their best to serve all families.
- RIPIN has been a wonderful partner. RIPIN parents have been locating and calling all families on the state list to ensure they still want the referral. This improves the process for transitioning the referrals back to the programs.

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- We are not the only state having staffing issues at Early Intervention programs. The federal government needs to increase funding for all IDEA programs, not just Part C programs.
- Jennifer is available to speak at meetings to discuss the switch back to the normal referral system.
- The Infant Toddler Coordinators Association is a nationwide organization made up of Part C coordinators for our country's 56 states and territories. It is an advocacy and support organization bringing state concerns to the federal level. Jennifer will be president of this Association starting January 1, 2023.

UPDATE: FAMILY HOME VISITING

Blythe Berger discussed family home visiting. (See slides). Key comments included:

- First Connections is a feeder program for family home visiting.
- There used to be five agencies in the First Connections program, but the South County agency could not continue due to funding and mission changes. Family Services of RI now serves those families.
- As part of First Connections, 6000 children have been referred, usually at birth. After an assessment and response, children are linked with the following long-term programs: Healthy Families America, Nurse-Family Partnership, and Parents as Teachers.
- Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) and other federal funding was reduced by \$2 million so DOH decreased the slots available in evidence-based home visiting programs (Healthy Families America, Nurse-Family Partnership, Parents as Teachers) this year.
- Starting in January 2023, home visiting agencies can begin billing Medicaid for Healthy Families America and Nurse-Family Partnership services. This will hopefully help expand these two programs back to their original scale. We are one of the first states to be able to leverage Medicaid funding in this way.

UPDATE: GOVERNOR'S WORKFORCE BOARD EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE PLAN

Jessica Mayernik updated the Council on the Governor's Workforce Board Early Childhood Workforce Plan. (See slides). The following comments were made:

- The governor's Workforce Board's Working Group will have monthly meetings through April 2023, when it will report its recommendations to the General Assembly.
- The wages conversation will be weaved throughout the recommendations because it is such a strong barrier to entry.

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- COMMENT: Several years ago, Children's Friend worked on establishing a state infant toddler credential so providers would have an alternative career pathway to achieving the credentials required to work in Early Head Start and Head Start programs. This is an important piece that would help bring people into the field so, hopefully, the work can be continued.
- COMMENT: High school career and technical programs are a good entry point for high school students interested in the field.
- COMMENT: The final report from the 2017-2018 Rhode Island infant toddler credential task force is available on the Early Learning Council website.

UPDATE: EARLY CHILDHOOD GOVERNANCE PLANNING/ROLE OF EARLY LEARNING COUNCIL

Kayla Rosen discussed the state's early childhood governance planning and the role of the Early Learning Council. (See slides). Key comments and questions included:

- The Working Group on Early Childhood Governance is looking at the overall coordination, administration, organization, and governance structure of early childhood programs in state government. Specifically, the Working Group will evaluate how we are organized across state government to support the early childhood sector, including the potential cost for any proposals and implementation of the system.
- The Working Group's final report will include recommendations for how the state should consider governance in the future.
- The Working Group is clearly defining what programs are in scope for its report.
- The Working Group is looking at how the pieces that support the programs in its scope are organized, funded, and administered across state agencies.
- To identify the problems the state needs to solve, the Working Group will determine the frustrations that providers and families feel as a result of governance issues.
- Once the problems are identified, the Working Group will discuss potential solutions.
- The Working Group will hire a vendor to help with the report.
- The Early Learning Council is the official advisory body to the Working Group. Early Learning Council meetings will have a standing agenda item to discuss topics and gather feedback related to the Working Group report.
- To create an opportunity for more regular feedback to the Working Group, Kayla will convene an informal advisory body that will participate in more frequent brainstorming sessions. This

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informal body is open to anyone who is interested, regardless of Early Learning Council membership. Email Kayla, kayla.s.rosen@governor.ri.gov if you would like to participate.

- Q: Are there state legislators on the Working Group?
A: No, the membership was specifically listed in the legislation, and it did not include any legislators. The final report will be presented to the legislators.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Comments and questions from the public included:

- COMMENT: Family child care homes are concerned about the impact to them from the expansion of the state RI Pre-K program since half of their income depends on serving children ages 3 to 5.
- COMMENT: The House of Representatives passed a bill that increases federal funding for family home visiting, but it has a state match requirement for funding. We need to advocate for state resources for family home visiting so we can access this additional money. The bill still needs to pass the Senate.
- Q: What is the waitlist for Early Intervention now?
A: Jennifer Kaufman was not at the meeting to answer. Leanne answered: At a November meeting, state agency staff reported that there were around 900 infants and toddlers on the statewide referral list. We need to keep tracking this to make sure it does not increase and hopefully it will decline soon as EI agencies are better able to hire and retain qualified staff. We want to return to being able to place children immediately into evaluations and therapeutic services.

Jenn Kaufman's answer via email after the meeting: *We really can't judge that at this time. All families who are currently on the state referral list are being assigned to providers during the month of December. Providers have put processes and procedures in place to determine eligibility and get families services. I will not truly know how many families are waiting for services (in the true sense) until January. All families are receiving a call from the RIPIN Parent Consultants to confirm the referral. All confirmed referrals (almost 300 families) have already been assigned to a provider. We will be assigning a second round on December 15th, and then most likely a third round.*

- COMMENT: The current closures and possible permanent reduction in Early Head Start and Head Start spaces is concerning not only because those spaces are high quality spaces, but also because they offer the extra supports those more vulnerable children need. Children served by Early Head Start and Head Start often have extra risk factors that require the additional supports those programs offer, especially in these difficult economic times.