

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Tuesday, June 23, 2020 9:00 a.m.-11:00 p.m.

Zoom

Meeting Summary

AGENDA SUMMARY

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

- Welcome, Opening Remarks, and Introduction
- Policy and Program Updates: State Budget & Legislation Update
- Review and Consider Recommendations from Workgroup
- Establish New Workgroup
- Policy and Program Updates
- Public comment

KEY POINTS

Key discussion points from the meeting are summarized below:

WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS, AND INTRODUCTION

Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green, Director Courtney Hawkins and Elizabeth Burke Bryant welcomed the Council. (See slides). The following comments were made:

- The pandemic has had a disproportionately higher impact on families with high needs so this Council's work is even more important during these challenging times.
- Director Hawkins explained that DHS is working to ensure that families have access to income supports during the pandemic. DHS has expanded benefit access by making the process easier for families. This improved service will continue beyond the pandemic. Additionally, the DHS child care team has worked tirelessly while making difficult decisions about closing and opening child care.
- Commissioner Infante-Green is releasing the turnaround plan for Providence today. The plan includes high benchmarks to hold educators accountable. In the past, the Providence school system has had problems because of a broken system, systemic racism and adult agendas. The new plan puts kids first. The plan is available for viewing at 4PVDkids.com.
 - All districts are preparing for different methods of instruction delivery in the coming year so they can pivot quickly if needed. However, the pandemic has impacted urban communities more because many urban families are not able to support at-home instruction while also working. Urban communities are looking for creative solutions to address this challenge. In Central Falls, for example, parents may be paid to stay home and learn with their children.
 - RIDE is convening its first summit on race and equity to examine the effects of subtle and not so subtle racism and the roles of people and policies in that racism. The summit will be a four part statewide series.
 - RIDE held its first statewide student summit. Children outside of the urban ring were not aware of the conditions at schools within the urban ring and they demanded educational equity. Those same students helped design this year's summer school.
- The Governor has appointed new members to the Early Learning Council.

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POLICY AND PROGRAM UPDATES: STATE BUDGET & LEGISLATION UPDATE

Kayla Rosen and Leanne Barrett updated the Council on the state budget and relevant legislation. (See slides.) The following key comments were made:

- The original FY21 budget included substantial investments in early childhood, such as further expansion for State Pre-K, increased CCAP rates and funding for family home visiting. However, the budget situation has changed because of the pandemic. The FY20 budget has a deficit of \$200 million and the FY21 budget has a deficit of over \$500 million. The state needs federal stimulus support to address this dire situation because COVID relief funding can only be used for COVID spending and not for budget deficits. A new FY21 state budget will not be passed before July 1st
- The main goal for federal funding during a recession is to maintain existing essential supports and prevents cuts to funding and services.
- There is a growing campaign to increase the state's revenue by adding a new tax bracket for the top 1% of earners in the state. Please see revenueforri.org for more details on this plan. The new tax bracket is projected to increase revenue for the state by \$128 million. The bracket would increase the percentage on adjusted gross income over \$475,000 from 5.99% to 8.99%. This change would impact 5000 filers.
- The Right From The Start Campaign is a state legislative and budget campaign that is working to promote policies and budgets to ensure the state has a strong system to support families with young children. Key advocacy points for the campaign include:
 - The current temporary increase in CCAP rates, which brings Rhode Island into compliance with federal regulations, must be enacted into law so it will extend beyond August 28th.
 - Rhode Island's paid family leave program needs to increase its wage replacement rate and extend its paid weeks to 12. Rhode Island provides the lowest benefits of the 9 states offering a paid family leave program and, currently, families do not take advantage of the program because they cannot afford to do so.
 - The state Medicaid program should cover community based doula services and family home visiting program visits..
 - Early Educator Investment Act: establish a statewide target wage scale for early educators and plans to close wage gaps (follow up to recommendations endorsed by the Early Learning Council in December 2019)
 - Rhode Island has the highest quality State Pre-K in the country, but we are ranked only 35th on access for 4 year olds and even lower for 3 year olds. We must increase access to high quality Pre-K programs.
 - Pass the governor's proposed affordable housing/early learning facilities bond.

REVIEW AND CONSIDER RECOMMENDATIONS FROM WORKGROUP

Deborah Masland and Ruth Gallucci presented the recommendations from the workgroup, Meeting the Social-Emotional Needs of Rhode Island's Youngest Learners. (See slides). Comments and questions included the following:

- These recommendations are only the 1st phase. There is more work required to implement these recommendations. During Phase 2, small groups of key stakeholders will develop an action plan.

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- We want all young children to experience a strong early childhood education foundation regardless of the program they attend. This foundation should be consistent across all state systems, including in the early childhood classrooms and in higher education where early childhood educators are taught.
- The first recommendation focuses on what all children should receive. It also lays out a recommendation that all educators receive the same level of professional development, technical assistance, and coaching so they are well-prepared for what they will experience in the classroom.
- The second recommendation focuses on the health supports provided by the state. These services must be more comprehensive and aligned so children are not waiting for services or deemed ineligible for services. To meet the service needs of children, we must update and revise the KidsConnect program as well as the roles of EI and ECSE. We want more availability for these higher level services.
- The third recommendation ensures that adequate state policies and systems are in place to implement the first 2 recommendations. One key policy change looks to reduce the number of children expelled or suspended from early childhood programs. The state has a contract with Bradley Hospital to operationalize mental health consultation with a focus on using interventions to reduce the expulsion/suspension rate. Programs should not expel or suspend children unless they have exhausted all other social emotional and mental health options. Educators need additional resources to handle classroom needs.
- All suggestions from stakeholders were incorporated into the recommendations.
- Q: What is the most important reason for the Council to endorse these recommendations and send them to the Children's Cabinet for additional work and implementation?
A: All children need to have access to the same early childhood foundation. Under the current system, some children are not able to access high quality child care because they are unable to receive the social emotional supports they need to succeed in a classroom or group care setting. When these children with high needs do not receive the services they require, it impacts all children in the classroom. Social emotional development in children forms the foundation for all other development and, ultimately, leads to success in the classroom.
- Q: Are the policies in the recommendations listed according to priority?
A: No, all policies are equally important.
- COMMENT: Children need continuity in care so reducing expulsion/suspension is important.
- COMMENT: Reducing the wait time for services is key to children's success.
- COMMENT: Using partnerships to bring systems together will ensure successful implementation of the recommendations.

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- Q: Is our current workforce sufficient to meet the requirements of the recommendations? Do we need a larger workforce to resource what children need?
A: The workforce is absolutely critical to implementation of these recommendations and is imbedded in Recommendation 2, but we will include additional language about the need for an expanded and qualified workforce. We need enough support agencies to help families. Behavioral health support for children of all ages is difficult to find across the state in a timely manner. The Phase 2 work groups will examine the workforce needs more closely.
- COMMENT: All levels of the workforce that interact with children must be trained in responding to the social emotional and mental health needs of children.
- Q: What are the details for the EOHHS pre-expulsion referral process?
A: The Phase 2 work groups will examine those details more closely once the Council endorses these recommendations.
- COMMENT: Teachers need more training in classroom management strategies and on providing social emotional support in the classroom. Too often professionals are trained in individual strategies, which are not as effective at the classroom level.
- COMMENT: Other states have tried legislating continuity of care, but it is challenging to accomplish without a stabilized workforce. Maintaining a stabilized workforce requires money for higher wages.
- COMMENT: If more educators understood appropriate diagnoses, families could leverage the Medicaid program to pay for social emotional and mental health services.
- Q: If we are focusing on equity and identifying implicit bias in Recommendation 3, is there a specific recommendation to look at systemic racism and how it plays a role in social emotional learning? Also, is there a recommendation to help support educators in racial equity once we identify racial barriers?
A: We will amend the recommendations to specifically address systemic racism in both Recommendation 1 and Recommendation 3.
- COMMENT: The whole early childhood system is negatively affected by racist policies, even how educators are compensated.
- COMMENT: Please include children with visible disabilities in the recommendations' photos.
- **POLL:** Does the Early Learning Council endorse the recommendations of the Meeting the Social-Emotional Needs of Rhode Island's Youngest Learners Work Group as presented, including the amendments suggested at this meeting today?
RESULT: 91% thumbs up; 9% thumbs sideways; 0% thumbs down. Recommendations endorsed.

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- Once we make the amendments, we will submit the endorsed recommendations to the Children's Cabinet.

ESTABLISH NEW WORKGROUP

Phyllis Lynch, Mary Varr, Celeste Bowler, Bruce Atchison, and Matt Weyer discussed the establishment of a new workgroup on Improving Connections Between Early Childhood and Early Grades. (See slides).

The following comments were made:

- The new workgroup will consist of 12 members. There will be 3 virtual meetings and the group will present an update at the September Early Learning Council meeting. The workgroup will present proposed recommendations for endorsement at the December Early Learning Council meeting. The workgroup will receive technical assistance from the Education Commission of the States (ECS).
- The letter "p" in "P to 3" is age 3.
- The workgroup will focus on 3 areas:
 - Authentic Alignment
 - Kindergarten
 - Transitions
- Reach out if you are interested in joining the workgroup.
- ECS is based in Denver and promotes communication among states with diverse interests, needs and traditions. ECS encourages states to work cooperatively on important national issues.
- ECS will leverage different grants to assist the workgroup. Those grants could include the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Heising-Simons Foundation.

POLICY AND PROGRAM UPDATES

Child Care

Caitlin Molina updated the Council on child care. Key comments included:

- The efforts to reopen child care during the pandemic have utilized an individualized approach, which provides programs with professional development and technical assistance to implement the necessary changes. Currently, 71% of programs are approved to reopen. Several programs have chosen not to reopen or would not be open in the summer anyway. DHS is reaching out to all programs to work with their individual needs.
- The COVID regulations have disproportionately affected preschool and school age programs with the lower capacity and stable group requirements.
- Although infant rooms are not affected by the COVID regulations, many programs have chosen to close infant rooms and repurpose them to toddler rooms.
- Programs have operationalized COVID regulations remarkably.

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- Staffing burdens have been tremendous because of the additional help needed at drop off/pick up and because of stable staffing requirements with reduced group size.
- Family child care homes only have to update capacity if they have household members that would count towards the stable group of 10.
- One hundred percent of the CARES funding goes to the people who need it most.
- We expect that State Pre-K classrooms in the school system will be at full capacity when they open in August.

RI Pre-K

Zoe McGrath updated the Council on RI Pre-K. Comments included:

- There was 92% participation in the virtual learning. Families were engaged and educators spoke with them weekly or daily. There were a lot of small groups and even virtual field trips.
- RIDE streamlined Kindergarten registration to accommodate the changes due to the pandemic. These improvements will remain going forward.
- All State Pre-K classrooms conducted a year-end ceremony for children and families.
- RIDE approved 17 additional State Pre-K classrooms and 334 seats. The new classrooms include three new communities.
- State Pre-K programs must submit plans for different scenarios before opening in the fall, including plans for in-person, hybrid and distance learning instruction. The plans must align with DHS and DOH guidance around COVID regulations. The goal is for State Pre-K to be ready to open for full in-person learning on August 31st.

Early Intervention

Casey Ferrara updated the Council on Early Intervention. Key comments included the following:

- EI is open and taking referrals.
- All visits are telehealth, but there are plans to reopen.
- There were some layoffs due to parents being unable to participate in EI because of the additional demands of distance learning.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Comments from the public included:

- COMMENT: At the September Early Learning Council meeting, could the DOH do a short presentation on the Health Equity Zones (HEZ) and how the 10 HEZ sites across Rhode Island could be an asset for the work of the Early Learning Council?

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- COMMENT: How are you addressing supports for the ECE workforce and the need for practitioners that are bilingual/bicultural?

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

Wednesday, September 30, 2020, 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

Wednesday, December 9, 2020, 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.