

# ***Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting***

Wednesday, March 27, 2024, 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rhode Island

188 Valley Street, Suite 125

Providence, RI

## **Meeting Summary**

### **AGENDA SUMMARY**

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

- Welcome, Opening Remarks, and Meeting Overview
- Cross-Sector Discussion: Early Childhood Program Staffing Successes and Challenges
- Updates: Early Educator Recruitment/Retention Initiatives
- Discussion: Input on the Rhode Island Child Care and Development Fund Triennial Plan
- Update: Implementation of New Rules for the Child Care Development Fund to Help Families and Providers
- Public comment

### **KEY POINTS**

Key discussion points from the meeting are summarized below:

#### **WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS, AND MEETING OVERVIEW**

Director Kimberly Merolla-Brito, Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green, and Paige Clausius-Parks welcomed the Council. (See slides). The following comments were made:

- The Council is committed to improving outcomes for young children in the state, particularly for our low income, most vulnerable families.
- Soon we will have an action plan for moving forward on the early childhood system governance topics raised at the last meeting.
- We are looking at how we can enhance collaboration within the early childhood sector.

#### **CROSS-SECTOR DISCUSSION: EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM STAFFING SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES**

Council members engaged in a discussion of the early childhood staffing successes and challenges. (See slides.) Comments and questions included:

- CCRI has been working with URI, RIC, RIDE, OPC and DHS since the fall to create a pathway for early childhood education programs so credits from CCRI will transfer to URI and RIC with 100% efficiency and no credit loss. CCRI is submitting the proposal to its curriculum review committee for approval with the expectation that students entering for the Fall 2024 semester will be able to register under the new program. This pathway is the result of an amazing collaboration between IHE and state entities.
- Q: Have you considered including a bilingual component to the early childhood education pathway? Multilingual learners are the fastest growing student group in the state, increasing by 30% in the last 10 years and 40% in the last 3 years.

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A: Please send Carol Patenaude at CCRI your data so she can use the supportive information when she meets with the department chair.

- RIC has a new program with 15 students currently enrolled. The program offers asynchronous classes and internships. Students will graduate with both an education certificate as well as a special education certificate.
- RIC has revised its early childhood program by combining the Birth to 3 and community programs into a Birth to 5 non-certification pathway. RIC is recruiting for this program as well as for the Birth to 3 certificate of undergraduate studies program, which includes a bilingual option.
- COMMENT: There are classes at CCRI labeled as “bilingual” that are not, in fact, truly bilingual. In these classes, occasionally the teacher chooses to explain topics in Spanish, but most of the teaching and all of the homework assignments are done in English. Several Spanish-speaking family child care providers who enrolled in these classes ended up dropping them because their English was not at the required level.
- COMMENT: Although CCRI does not have any AA classes that are bilingual, there are bilingual early childhood classes in the Workforce program offered by DHS and the CDA program offered through RIECETP. All early childhood programs are progressively working towards fully bilingual offerings.

## **UPDATES: EARLY EDUCATOR RECRUITMENT/RETENTION INITIATIVES**

Nicole Chiello, Lisa Hildebrand, and Catherine Green updated the Council on Early Educator Recruitment/Retention Initiatives. (See slides). Comments and questions included the following:

- The Infant Toddler Registered Apprenticeship pilot developed strong partnerships for future work.
- The pre and post ITERS for the Registered Apprenticeship pilot showed an increase in classroom quality over the 18 months.
- Because recruitment for the pilot occurred during the pandemic, some participants were not able to finish the program. However, those that remained showed great success and gave positive feedback. RIAEYC will track participants going forward to see if the pilot helps with future retention and salaries.
- A second group of Registered Apprentices started in January 2024, as the program moves out of the pilot phase and towards sustainability.
- Q: Can the Registered Apprentice program be offered in Spanish too?

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A: The pilot was conducted in child care centers so it was English speaking based. The family child care union might offer a Spanish speaking apprenticeship.

- Q: Is there any concern, from an HR perspective, with the mentors in the Registered Apprenticeship program being staff supervisors within the same center?  
A: That format has changed in the sustainability model. Now the mentor is embedded in a different way and the onsite program mentor is optional. For Level 1, mentors are through the LearnERS Program at BrightStars and for Level 2 the mentors are from the RIC certificate program. The pilot showed that requiring onsite mentors caused too much additional work for already overwhelmed programs, although optional training is still available to onsite supervisors, if desired.
- Supporting CTE programs in high schools creates a recruitment pathway.
- CTE students are able to visit college campuses to learn about the opportunities available to early childhood education degree holders.
- CTE support has been built into the T.E.A.C.H. operational budget using CCDF funds to sustain the program beyond the pilot phase.
- There was interest in the CTE-RIAEYC initiative from CTE programs other than Woonsocket, Chariho, and the MET school so there is the potential for more program enrollment in the future.
- Q: Are you tracking CTE students to see if they apply to T.E.A.C.H. or other programs?  
A: We can track if they apply to T.E.A.C.H., but it is hard to get other information from high school students. Some students started internships through the CTE program, so we were able to track them.
- COMMENT: There is the potential to do more with the CTE program if formalized through RIDE, including support through the job fairs now being offered by RIDE.
- All demographic data on these pilots is being collected for later analysis.
- Q: Is there any progress in creating a state credential for infant toddler teachers? Head Start has come out with expansion money for Early Head Start/Head Start, which will require a CDA or state credential.  
A: There was a discussion in 2018 about a credential for infant toddler providers that required a CDA plus college credits. The advisory group was not in alignment on whether more than a CDA or less than a CDA should be required. Additionally, post-pandemic, it is harder to move people along the quality continuum so we will approach credentialing incrementally to encourage

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forward movement. In the meantime, early child care workers can pursue the CDA or T.E.A.C.H. pathway with an infant toddler certificate.

- COMMENT: Most states have infant toddler credentials, but DHS has never issued a credential because state credentials are usually the purview of RIDE. At this time, however, RIDE does not have the capacity for issuing an infant toddler credential.
- Unless funding is allocated in the FY25 state budget, there will be one more final round of payments in the WAGE\$ program, which will require verification of employment within the same classroom and in the same role as previous rounds. Retention between the first 2 payments was 98%.
- Window 10 of the Pandemic Retention Bonuses will be smaller and will be the final round of payments unless new funding is allocated in the FY25 state budget. The bonus amount will be determined by dividing the remaining funds by the number of applicants during a reduced 2 week application period.
- The CCAP for child care providers pilot required a lot of logistical work to allow for applications outside of the RIBridges application system for child care assistance.
- The survey from the CCAP for child care providers pilot indicated that 88% of respondents had a clear understanding of the pilot, 98% of respondents said there were timely responses to applications and good or great experiences with technical assistance, 92% of respondents found the enrollment/disenrollment and attendance reporting processes clear and easy to implement, and over 75% of respondents said the pilot was useful for retaining or recruiting employees.
- Q: Will there be a CCAP for EI providers program?  
A: Legislation including EI providers has been submitted but has not yet passed.
- COMMENT: Three of these programs will end this summer unless funding is allocated in the FY25 budget. In addition to federal child care stabilization funding ending: the WAGE\$ program, the retention bonus program, and the CCAP for child care educators program will end. The pending Early Educator Compensation Stabilization Act would continue the WAGE\$ program for all participants and retention bonuses program for the lowest wage participants. In order to encourage legislative support for the Early Educator Compensation Stabilization Act, the bill proposes that the pandemic retention bonuses would continue only for those already enrolled, who earn less than or equal to \$23/hour, work directly with children, and have received 3 out of the last 4 windows. The CCAP for child care educators is a separate pending bill, which includes participation by EI providers as well as a proposed removal of the income cap to increase recruitment of people with higher family earnings.

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- In sustaining Head Start and Early Head Start, the focus has been on opening closed classrooms and increasing state support per child slot. Early Head Start was able to reopen all of its temporarily closed classrooms. Some Early Head Start and Head Start classrooms have been permanently closed through the federal change of scope process to allow grantees to allocate federal funds to support increased operating costs, including higher wages for staff. Adding a third educator in Head Start classrooms has lowered the ratio and helped educator mental health.
- Q: Is the lack of reopening Head Start classroom tied to reduced enrollment or lack of staffing?  
A: It is all due to a lack of staffing.
- Creating a visual comprehensive resource guide for pathways funded by DHS helps support career advancement and high quality classrooms.

## **DISCUSSION: INPUT ON THE RHODE ISLAND CHILD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT FUND TRIENNIAL PLAN**

Nicole Chiello led the discussion and gathered input on the Rhode Island Child Care and Development Fund Triennial Plan. (See slides). The following comments and questions were made:

- Every three years the state must approve a new plan for using its CCDF Block Grant. The plan is based on what DHS is currently doing with the funding and not on what DHS would want to do with the funding.
- There is a new appendix section that identifies current areas of noncompliance and the steps being taken by the state towards compliance.
- The last plan focused on meeting federal compliance requirements and the new plan will look at what the state can do to reach the next level.
- COMMENT: DHS is doing an excellent job communicating. Emails and stakeholder notices and calls for feedback are timely and efficient. However, there should be more discussion around resources for the field because the potential ending of some financial support programs might have a negative effect on the industry.
- Q: Is the CCAP for child care workers program definitely ending?  
A: No, the last day for applications is July 30<sup>th</sup> and, once approved, a child care worker has 12 months of eligibility. The hope is that the program is made permanent before worker eligibility ends.
- Q: Is participation in CCAP increasing since the downturn during the pandemic?  
A: The numbers are starting to increase but are still not at pre-pandemic levels.

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- Q: When will the market rate survey for 2024 be available?  
A: It is conducted every 3 years around the same time as the state CCDF plan. Work is beginning on it now and the information will be available around the same time the state plan is due. This survey will include a mandated section on the cost of care, which will make it a bit longer than the previous ones where that section was optional. The information collected will help inform next steps.
- COMMENT: The partnership between RIAEYC and DHS is better than ever before.
- COMMENT: Families are seeing a lot of delay in processing applications and reviewing paperwork at DHS.
- COMMENT: Families are encouraged to take advantage of technology to improve access to their DHS accounts. Online portals help families become better informed, which can decrease the need to phone or visit DHS, thereby saving time for both DHS and families.
- Q: Does DHS collect and review metrics on wait times and the number of required visits to DHS before issues are resolved?  
A: Yes. Some states have up to an average 6 hour wait time for calls, but we have only a 3 hour average wait time for calls, although the goal is a 30 minute wait. There is abandonment on calls over 3 hours, but, typically, those people are able to connect with someone at DHS within 2 to 3 days. DHS wants to improve wait times, but no one is losing benefits because of the inability to contact someone at DHS. Viewing accounts through the online portal would show families the full explanation for any loss of benefits.
- COMMENT: DHS should leverage child care centers to help reduce wait times. If programs had access to family information, they might be able to answer many of the questions families have, thereby reducing the number of people reaching out to DHS.

## **UPDATE: IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW RULES FOR The CHILD CARE DEVELOPMENT FUND TO HELP FAMILIES AND PROVIDERS**

Nicole Chiello updated the Council on the implementation of new rules for the child care development fund. (See slides). Comments included:

- Contact Nicole with any questions.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT**

- There were no additional comments from the public.