

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, September 27, 2023, 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
- Updates/Discussion: Early Childhood Governance Group
- Updates/Discussion: Birth through Grade 3 Staffing Challenges
- Brief Updates: Strategies to Address Staffing Challenges
- Public comment

KEY POINTS

Key discussion points from the meeting are summarized below:

WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS, AND MEETING OVERVIEW

Director Kimberly Merolla-Brito, Deputy Commissioner Lisa Odom-Villella, and Paige Clausius-Parks welcomed the Council. (See slides). The following comment was made:

- The Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Legislative Wrap-Up is available online at <https://www.rikidscount.org/Policy-Advocacy/Legislative-Wrap-Ups>.

UPDATES/DISCUSSION: EARLY CHILDHOOD GOVERNANCE GROUP

Kayla Rosen, Elliott Regenstein and Nasha Patel updated the Council on the Early Childhood Governance Group and facilitated a discussion. (See slides.) The following comments and questions were made:

- Rhode Island has ambitious goals for improving its early childhood education system, but to make those goals a reality requires an effective system of governance.
- People working with children may not be directly involved in the early childhood system's governance structure, but they are impacted by it. Also, it impacts the ability of the state to achieve its vision.
- Although thousands of children in Rhode Island are receiving services under the current system, there are thousands of other children who are not receiving the services they need.
- The ECCE spending slide refers to only the funding streams defined in the RFP.
- For the Consolidated model, services are usually consolidated within either the education or human services agencies, which have other functions as well. The Created model establishes an agency just for early childhood governance.

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, September 27, 2023, 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rhode Island

188 Valley Street, Suite 125

Providence, RI

Meeting Summary

- Half the states have a Created or Coordinated model. Michigan and Oregon are moving from a Consolidated model to a Created model.
- All states interviewed for the draft report moved to a unified early childhood governance system after being in the same position that Rhode Island is in now. Post unification, those states saw more alignment between child care, Pre-K, and K-12.
- Unification does not solve the issue of creating silos because it is creating a different silo, but it can raise the floor by creating a critical mass of expertise and operational savvy and raise the ceiling by allowing supportive governors to achieve an early childhood agenda more effectively.
- A successful transition requires a strong leader skilled at managing administrative operations. Vision is not enough.
- Unification must include, at a minimum, Pre-K, child care, and Head Start, but it can go beyond that core.
- There is an emerging body of best practices from other states to help guide the transition process.
- Because of its size and geography, Rhode Island acts like a large county in other states.
- Q: What governance model would best reach the 52,500 children under 5 in the state, only a small portion of which are being served by the current system?
A: Several states implemented a unified governance system because they needed to expand their early childhood education programs and the challenges they were facing were only growing as they expanded. Unified money management, quality control, and data collection are more impactful as a state serves a higher percentage of children. Expanding one facet of a system, e.g., state Pre-K, impacts other programs, e.g., child care providers, and having a single agency managing the impacts of the interrelated expansions creates a better ecosystem. Even if the act of unification does not increase the number of seats, it makes funding go farther, which allows states to successfully advocate for additional funding opportunities to support more offerings.
- Almost 100% of the states that unified feel like it was a positive change.
- Q: What should state agencies think about during the unification process?
A: Agencies must consider both operational and cultural issues. For example, RIDE and DHS have different cultures and unification would bring together staff from both of those different cultures. Established dynamics between providers and agency staff might also be disrupted. Leaders of the unified entity would need to be attuned to those differences and manage the transition process

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, September 27, 2023, 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rhode Island

188 Valley Street, Suite 125

Providence, RI

Meeting Summary

with empathy. Additionally, workgroups are needed to focus on the business systems to ensure continuity across change. The unified agency should initiate conversations around priorities because certain processes might need to take precedence over others during the transition process.

- Q: How long is the timeframe for transitioning to a new governance system?
A: In New Mexico, it was one fiscal year. Minnesota had 2 years and another state did it in 6 months. Generally, 1 year is considered the right amount of time to complete the work.
- COMMENT: Rhode Island's transition of licensing from DCYF to DHS provides lessons learned for this larger transition. That transition was a positive experience and the provider community benefitted from it.
- Q: How do providers feel about this transition?
A: In MA, providers only need to email one person to get an answer to a question, whereas in Rhode Island they need to email multiple people. But the expertise within each agency in Rhode Island is very high and providers fear they will lose that after unification.
- COMMENT: Consider unification from the perspective of the agencies, not of individual staff members. Although we want to leverage the skills of our current workforce, the new structure will last beyond the career of any one person.
- COMMENT: Although MA has the EEC, the UPK is under the jurisdiction of the Boston Public Schools and not under the EEC. A lot of what we are talking about here falls under a different agency in MA.
- COMMENT: There is a concern that, because of federal law, early childhood special education would stay at RIDE, which, after unification, would only silo early childhood special education more at time when the special education system is already being challenged by the increasing number of children coming into programs with extreme needs.
- COMMENT: How Part C (Early Intervention) fits into unification is hard. Some states have the view that integrating Pre-K, child care, and the Head Start Collaboration Office creates an agency that looks holistically at the early childhood education system in a way that allows for better collaboration with both Parts B (preschool special education) and C (Early Intervention).
- A focus on special education can be built into any governance model.

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, September 27, 2023, 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rhode Island

188 Valley Street, Suite 125

Providence, RI

Meeting Summary

- COMMENT: Some states feel that having a unified early childhood commissioner interacting with a K-12 commissioner at a peer level creates an opportunity for improved outcomes when compared to having B-8 within the same agency as K-12. In North Dakota, for example, oversight for Pre-K was placed within a unified early childhood governance system while the state superintendent retained oversight for K-12. The superintendent felt that structure promoted better collaboration.
- COMMENT: Whatever system we choose, we do want consolidation for credentialing.
- Q: Will EI and B to 3 get sufficient support when they are grouped in the same system with older children? We have been doing a good job with that younger age group and we want them to remain a priority in the system, especially younger children with special needs.
A: If the unified agency's mandate is B to 5, then infants and toddlers represent 60% of the targeted population, so home visiting and Part C would be a big part of its focus. Governance is an iterative process of rethinking relationships. With a consolidated agency, we can think of infant toddler relationships differently over time and constantly improve them.

UPDATES/DISCUSSION: BIRTH THROUGH GRADE 3 STAFFING CHALLENGES

Emma Villa, Casey Ferrara, Lori Wagner, and Mary Varr began the conversation on the staffing challenges for birth to grade 3. (See slides). Key comments and questions included the following:

- COMMENT: I am concerned about how parents and staff interact with little ones and how they interact with us. Providers know the needs of children and what they want and need. Some parents do not believe that they need quality childcare, but children 0 to 3 need childcare and EI and other services. Agencies need to help providers do better for children. Family child care providers need more help. Everyone needs to come together to pursue the same goal of supporting children.
- Increased financial incentives have helped with retention at EI, but not with recruitment.
- There has been a lot of turnover at the Early Learning Center.
- Increased benefits for home visiting have not helped with recruitment or retention. It is a struggle to get professionals to stay.
- Early Head Start has not had as many applicants.
- Some Head Start programs have had to reduce enrollment so they can increase wages to retain and recruit staff, although that has not always worked.

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, September 27, 2023, 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rhode Island

188 Valley Street, Suite 125

Providence, RI

Meeting Summary

- Many people do not show up for interviews or for the first day of work after being hired. There is a cost to programs when they pay for all the required pre-hire paperwork, background checks, and orientation programs only to have the new employees not show up.
- With insufficient classroom staffing, there is a loss of revenue for programs and a reduction in availability of childcare for families.
- Q: Since we are finding that we do not have enough people that are credentialed and/or have relevant early childhood experience, what does the number of students look like from a higher education perspective? The lack of qualified teachers is especially concerning because of the increased number of children with special needs.
A: RIC has a full cohort of 20 students. The numbers have not changed. Two-thirds of the students are in the teacher certification pathway and one-third are in the community programs pathway. Students want higher paid positions, like those in the public school system. The new Birth to 3 program has only 2 students enrolled in it so it will be combined with the Birth to 5 program. At CCRI, the early childhood education concentration is the highest and strongest enrolled major. Many students are already working in programs, however, and are dedicated to their jobs. The CCRI RIECETP CDA and Grant program is also very strong. We also have high expectations for professionalism when seeking employment.
- COMMENT: People in the T.E.A.C.H. program are already committed to programs. This is a program for the incumbent workforce and is not, primarily, a recruitment strategy.
- RI Pre-K classrooms in public schools have more openings than they had before and principals are struggling to find teachers for K-1 classrooms too. One classroom did not open because there were no qualified teachers available.
- Lack of Pre-K through 2 certified teachers is a statewide struggle, even in public schools, despite there being plenty of 1st through 6th grade certified teachers.
- COMMENT: Programs are maintaining classroom minimums just to follow the ratio because they cannot find teachers. As a result, the waitlists are very long.
- COMMENT: Programs are finding the need to add teachers to classrooms beyond the ratio because of the number of children with special needs. Teachers need even more assistants due to child behaviors.

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, September 27, 2023, 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rhode Island

188 Valley Street, Suite 125

Providence, RI

Meeting Summary

- COMMENT: Because of the limited availability of qualified staff and the increased number of children with special needs, programs are concerned about maintaining their BrightStars quality ratings.
- BrightStars offers the LearnERS program to help new teachers receive intensive in-class coaching.

BRIEF UPDATES: STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS STAFFING CHALLENGES

Lisa Hildebrand, Nicole Chiello, Catherine Green, and Jennifer Kaufman updated the Council on some strategies to address staffing challenges. (See slides). Comments included:

- BrightStars is working with the PDG team to get additional funding and to extend the timing for the Step up to Wage\$ pilot. Extending the time for the pilot will permit a more thorough analysis of the pilot's impact.
- Window 7 of the pandemic retention bonus program will open soon. Potentially, the retention bonus program will have 10 Windows.
- The slide on the CCAP for Child Care Pilot should say that there are 70 preschool children enrolled.
- The Early Head Start and Head Start retention efforts are not just focused on teachers. They also seek to retain other professionals providing comprehensive services to children, such as: mental health providers, health providers, nutritionists, nurses, and family home visitors as well as staff that monitor immunizations, lead levels and housing.
- The Office of Head Start updated their priorities to add more visibility to equity efforts, although equity has always been at the core of Head Start's work.
- The Infant Toddler Coordinators Association for Part C/Early Intervention has found that staffing issues are a national problem, although staffing has slowly increased since 2021.
- Although there is a small increase in staffing and a reduction in turnover, the increase in referrals to EI has outpaced that increase, so demand for EI services is still not being met.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Comments and questions from the public included:

- Q: Has there been any discussion around helping to pay off student loans for individuals who work in early childhood education, which could help recruitment to the field?
A: The Wavemaker loan assistance program at the Commerce Department added "teachers" to its list of eligible occupations, but that program is small with limited funding. Also, it is not clear that early childhood educators in community-based programs (child care, Early Intervention, Head

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, September 27, 2023, 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rhode Island

188 Valley Street, Suite 125

Providence, RI

Meeting Summary

Start, etc.) are included in the definition of “teachers.” The federal public service loan forgiveness program is also an option for some early educators. After 10 years of payments, a person working at a non-profit can have their loans forgiven.

- COMMENT: The RI Housing Resources Commission is going through a governance transition like the one proposed here. The first Secretary of Housing hired in 2021 was forced to resign in 2023. If embarking on a change this important, hiring the right person is of huge importance. Move slowly to make the best hire because regaining trust for coordinated collaboration efforts after a weak start is difficult.
- COMMENT: Housing appreciates the ability to collaborate and coordinate with the Early Learning Council on issues intersecting child care and housing.