

Rhode Island Early Learning Council

Improving Governance of Early Care and Education Systems in RI

December 6, 2023

DRAFT FOR CONSIDERATION AT THE DECEMBER 13, 2023 COUNCIL MEETING

Governance refers to a state government's organizational structures and its placement of authority and accountability for making policy, resource allocation, and implementation decisions. At least half of the states in the U.S. have moved to consolidate governance of key early childhood systems into an existing state agency or have created a new state agency to oversee key early childhood systems. In 2022-2023, a seven-member Early Childhood Governance Working Group was appointed by the General Assembly to study the early childhood system in Rhode Island and make a recommendation on any changes needed to improve the coordination, administration, and organizational structure of early childhood programs and services, including whether, and under what circumstances, the state should consider unifying early childhood programs under one state agency. The Rhode Island Early Learning Council was named as the advisory body to the Working Group.

The following recommendation will be presented for endorsement by the RI Early Learning Council at its December 13, 2023 meeting.

Recommendation: Rhode Island should **create a new cabinet-level RI Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning** charged with developing a high-quality child care and public preschool system for families statewide and overseeing child care & early learning licensing/quality, the Child Care Assistance Program, Early Head Start/Head Start Collaboration and RI Pre-K. Rhode Island should consider moving other early childhood systems to this new office in a later phase.

The creation of this new office should be contingent on:

- A one-year transition timeline and adequate resources to ensure there is no risk of disruption to systems that children and families depend on to enroll and participate in early care and education programs and no risk of disruption to systems that early care and education providers need to get paid for their services.
- Strong leadership, including a Director with a deep understanding of early childhood systems – particularly child care, Head Start/Early Head Start, and Pre-K -- and a strong track record of positive engagement with the early childhood community.
- Sufficient resources to attract and retain effective leadership and highly competent staff (recommend matching the RI Department of Education's compensation package and wage scale). All existing state staff should be given every opportunity to be considered for positions in the new agency.
- Structures (such as a board of directors) to ensure the office has power to adopt and revise policies, request and allocate resources, and improve systems for children, families, programs, and frontline staff. The RI Early Learning Council, which has been meeting since 2010 and meets the federal requirements for a State Advisory Council on Early Care and Education, should be a key advisory body for the Office and the Board.