



Unifying Rhode Island's Early Childhood Care and Education Systems

The [strategic plan](#) of the Rhode Island Early Learning Council is designed to address and improve the system of early childhood care and education in the state, specifically including prenatal through age 8. The recently approved [Early Childhood Care and Education Strategic Plan](#) focuses on ages birth through age 5, with the vision of supporting young children to be ready for Kindergarten and putting them on a path to reading proficiently in third grade. Bridging these two documents provides opportunities to improve alignment, coordination, quality and transitions across the learning continuum toward improving [third grade reading proficiency](#) and developing strong foundations for future success for all Rhode Island kids.

To operationalize this connection, this workgroup was formed to focus on the preschool (starting at age 3) through third grade years, inclusive of the various environments young children experience [prior to kindergarten entry](#), and to [develop recommendations](#) to be approved by the full Rhode Island Early Learning Council and submitted to the Rhode Island Children's Cabinet and ultimately to Gov. Gina Raimondo.

Workgroup members would like to acknowledge that this report was written and submitted in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report provides recommendations that are focused on building and improving systems-level policies that may not be immediately relevant or feasible from either a health or financial standpoint. Conversely, one could argue that investments for Rhode Island's youngest children have never been more important, especially when considering the [detrimental effects](#) of the 2008 recession, and the [learning loss](#) and [social and emotional effects](#) young students are experiencing since the pandemic began.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was developed through the hard work of numerous dedicated early childhood stakeholders who participated through a workgroup of the Rhode Island Early Learning Council.

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Adopted Recommendations

The following recommendations were collaboratively developed, vetted and voted upon by workgroup members over a five-month period. Together, they aim to address the three most pressing shared priorities aimed toward better alignment and connection of Rhode Island's early childhood care and education systems.

1. Support and Diversify the Workforce

The child care and pre-K workforce [is essential](#) and deserves equal treatment and the same pay as its K-12 counterparts. Yet these educators and caregivers [are generally underpaid](#) and undervalued, and experience [racial wage gaps](#), contributing to high turnover and low job satisfaction. Additionally, the National Association for the Education of Young Children has developed the [Power to the Profession](#) initiative, which highlights several areas for consideration.

- 1.1** Develop and implement a five-year plan to increase recruitment, retention and incentives for the child care and preschool workforce. Include strategies to support the current workforce through [improved compensation](#), obtainment of the necessary skills to achieve certification and best practices for retention incentives.
- 1.2** Identify creative pathways and opportunities to early childhood certification for a more diverse workforce (demographically, culturally and linguistically), including leadership opportunities specific to early learning. Identify and develop plans to remove barriers to program access to ensure equitable participation.

2. Promote Consistent Assessment and Data Sharing

There are numerous breakdowns and [areas of fragmentation](#) that exist in the current early childhood care and education system and its connection to K-12. Acknowledging privacy concerns, [sharing data](#) between agencies can provide critical information for policymakers to [better understand and improve](#) programs and services.

Integrally connected to data sharing is assessment. Systematic, ongoing and developmentally appropriate assessment structures are needed in P-3, [ahead of federally mandated requirements](#) for testing at the end of third grade. This includes [kindergarten entry assessments](#) among others. This would ideally provide teachers, administrators and policymakers with better information on young students' needs prior to the end of third grade.

- 2.1** Convene stakeholders to discuss and conceptualize a new P-3 assessment system, including a kindergarten entry profile for measuring progress in P-3 and to evaluate system quality and effectiveness. Ensure that the P-3 assessment system is developmentally appropriate, comprehensive and inclusive of whole child elements (e.g., social and emotional learning, literacy, numeracy and more). These assessments must be formative and not used for school accountability but to inform policy. Additionally, develop and pilot this assessment project for select districts through a request-for-proposals process. This would include providing funding and flexibility for training, implementation and reviewing outcomes data.
- 2.2** Convene an early childhood data governance committee spanning the field of early childhood care and education with the charge to identify the goals of integrated data, the various datapoints currently shared, privacy concerns and/or restrictions to data integration, and needs for sustainability. The committee would use these findings to develop a collaborative plan of action and further recommendations for the State of Rhode Island General Assembly and state agencies.

3. Provide Opportunities for Enhanced Professional Learning and Development

[Research has shown](#) that educator knowledge and training are two of the strongest indicators of quality in an early childhood program and in K-12 education. Early childhood educators and leaders need professional development that is tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities of teaching and that supports development in the early years.

To best serve each child, the [early childhood workforce](#) also needs direct [training and instructional supports](#) to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse group of children with varied developmental, social and emotional needs.

- 3.1** Increase requirements or further incentivize joint professional development for child care, pre-K, Head Start and kindergarten educators, and support staff, as well as afterschool and summer program providers, to have a statewide common knowledge and understanding of the [Rhode Island Early Learning & Development Standards](#) and to encourage collaboration and [stronger transitions](#).
- 3.2** Provide guidance and the necessary professional development and technical assistance for all involved personnel on utilizing developmentally appropriate, and linguistically and culturally responsive, instruction. Ensure that these opportunities are job-embedded and accessible for all.

NEXT STEPS

The intention of each of these recommendations is to ensure that all children in Rhode Island enter kindergarten ready to learn, develop strong foundations in [academic, social and emotional skills](#) in [kindergarten through third grade](#) and ultimately reach third grade reading proficiency goals, and that their families are meaningfully engaged throughout this learning continuum.

We urge the Rhode Island Early Learning Council and the Rhode Island Children’s Cabinet to consider and adopt these recommendations as the first step toward improving alignment, coordination, quality and transitions across the entire continuum and that it is done in an equitable manner, focusing on the students furthest from opportunity first. This workgroup recognizes that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous financial and personnel restrictions on the state of Rhode Island, as it has around the country. Despite this, young Rhode Island children depend on this council to act in [their best interests](#), and this is reflected in the enclosed recommendations.

Education Commission of the States supported the Rhode Island Early Learning Council and this workgroup in the development of this report. The views herein reflect those of the workgroup.