



Parents Leading for Educational Equity  
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**Submitted by: Ramona Santos Torres**  
**On Behalf of: Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE)**  
**Date: February 6th, 2025**  
**To: The Rhode Island House Education Committee**

**Dear Chairperson McNamara and Members of the House Education Committee,**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in strong support of H5164, legislation that seeks to establish an Early Childhood IDEA Services Task Force to address the urgent and ongoing challenges in delivering high-quality early intervention and special education services to children with developmental delays and disabilities in Rhode Island.

As the Executive Director of Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE), a grassroots organization dedicated to advocating for equitable educational opportunities for all children, I stand with families across Rhode Island in urging the passage of this critical bill. Every child regardless of race, zip code, socioeconomic status, or ability deserves timely access to early intervention services that can profoundly shape their educational and developmental trajectories.

For too long, Rhode Island's youngest learners with disabilities and developmental delays have faced significant barriers to receiving the support they need. Despite two Medicaid rate increases in recent years, early intervention programs remain critically understaffed, leaving hundreds of infants and toddlers waiting more than 45 days for evaluations. In March 2023, school districts, particularly Providence Public Schools reported severe disruptions due to staffing shortages. These delays exacerbate existing inequities, disproportionately impacting children of color and those from low-income families.

The COVID-19 pandemic further strained Rhode Island's early intervention system, compounding longstanding challenges. Families faced significant service disruptions, leaving many children without access to essential therapies and interventions during critical developmental years. These delays have lifelong consequences, widening opportunity gaps and creating additional hurdles for children already facing systemic inequities.

As an organization committed to ensuring that families, especially those in under-resourced communities, have a voice in shaping policies that impact their children's futures, we have seen firsthand the devastating consequences of these service gaps. Families should not have to navigate bureaucratic roadblocks to access services that are legally mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

We are excited about H5164's potential to transform early intervention services in Rhode Island by establishing a task force that unites key stakeholders including parents and caregivers, early childhood educators, medical professionals, and policymakers. This task force will develop actionable solutions to ensure all children receive timely screenings and evaluations, allowing critical interventions to begin as early as possible.

Families cannot afford to wait. The early years are critical for brain development, and delays in services only deepen existing inequities. Every child should enter kindergarten with the foundational support they need to succeed, not burdened by the lasting effects of missed interventions.

We are deeply grateful to the sponsors of this bill, including Representatives Carson, Shallcross Smith, McNamara, Cotter, Donovan, Caldwell, Noret, Diaz, and Casimiro, for their leadership in advancing this important issue.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We welcome the opportunity to continue this conversation and work collaboratively to support the implementation of this vital legislation.

Sincerely,  
Ramona Santos Torres  
Executive Director  
Parents Leading for Educational Equity