

February 6, 2025

The Honorable Joseph M. McNamara
Chairman, House Committee on Education
RI House of Representatives
By Email To: HouseEducation@rilegislature.gov

Re: **Support for H-5164 (Early Childhood IDEA Task Force)**

Dear Chairman McNamara:

Thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony in **support** of the creation of a task force to make recommendations regarding Rhode Island's systems that serve children with disabilities birth to age five (H-5164). RIPIN is peer-led, meaning that most of our staff and board are parents of children with disabilities, and for decades we have helped hundreds of parents annually navigate Early Intervention (EI) and preschool special education. In 2024 alone, RIPIN staff supported families at more than 500 meetings related to transition from Early Intervention into Preschool Special Education. **From the front-row seat, we see every day the struggles that families are having to access critical services for their young children with disabilities, and the consequences for the children, the families, and their communities.**

It is absolutely critical that young children with disabilities receive timely services. Supports provided at a young age often pay enormous dividends, with many EI recipients not needing special education services later. And the converse is also true: **Missed opportunities to provide timely services can have negative consequences for years or even decades to come.**

In Rhode Island, children with disabilities and developmental delays **from birth through their third birthday** are served by **Early Intervention** (EI, sometimes also referred to as IDEA Part C). The EI system is administered by RI EOHHS, with services such as speech, physical therapy, or occupational therapy offered by nine community-based providers who bill Medicaid and commercial insurers. **Once a child with disabilities turns three, local school districts become responsible** for the provision of special education and related services to eligible children (through IDEA Part B, Section 619). This system and its funding are highly complex, involving every school district in the State as well as Head Starts, State Pre-K, and other programs where preschool-age children can receive special education services. Shortages and wait lists in EI have made local headlines. So too did recent preschool special education access challenges in Providence, and we at RIPIN know that Providence is far from alone in having challenges meeting the needs of preschoolers with disabilities.

For the past year, RIPIN (with the support of the van Beuren Charitable Foundation) has been conducting listening sessions, key stakeholder interviews, and other research to develop recommendations to strengthen Rhode Island's preschool special education system for children with disabilities age 3-5. Please find enclosed a copy of our preliminary findings and recommendations, which include common sense improvements to the school funding formula as well as joining six other states to create an option for Rhode Island families to extend Early Intervention until the September after a child's third birthday to create a smooth transition into school-based services. While we are proud of this work and stand behind the recommendations, RIPIN does not have the

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capacity, access to data, fiscal expertise, or imprimatur of government that a Task Force like the one proposed in this legislation could bring to bear on this important topic.

We support the Early Childhood IDEA Task Force because a few things have become clear to us. First, the system today is not working. Too many infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities are waiting too long to receive services, with predictable negative consequences for them, their families, and their schools. The system is also incredibly complex, particularly for preschool special education. Only a public-private partnership with appropriate resources like this Task Force can tackle an issue of this level of complexity.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this testimony, and please do not hesitate to follow up if we can be helpful in any other way.

Sincerely,

/s/

Samuel Salganik, JD
Executive Director
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