

Testimony in Support of H 7497
Rhode Island Pre-Kindergarten Education Act
House Committee on Finance
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The Economic Progress Institute supports Representative McNamara's H 7497, which would ensure investments for competitive compensation for teachers, as well as sustain and strengthen access to other essential parts of the early care and education system, particularly infant and toddler care.

All children deserve access to high-quality early education. Early care and education programs, such as Head Start and Childcare Assistance Program (CCAP), support the growth and development of Rhode Island's babies, young children, and their families. Qualified early educators are necessary for Rhode Island's children to have the best outcomes. Quality early care and education are the building blocks for children's academic success, social-emotional development, and lifelong employment and health outcomes.

Representative McNamara's H7497 would mandate continued investments in Pre-K, Head Start, and Early Head Start, while also allocating a 30% funding set-aside to sustain and expand access for childcare and early learning programs for infants and toddlers. Rhode Island's Childcare Assistance Program (CCAP) and Head Start enrollment have decreased by 29% and 39%, respectively, while enrollment in Pre-K has increased by more than 600%.¹ A mixed delivery system highlighted in H 7497 includes Head Start agencies and center- and family-based childcare providers; this is critical to ensuring access to childcare and other early learning programs while Rhode Island works towards a universal Pre-K system.

Additionally, Representative McNamara's H 7497 would make funds available to ensure the median wages for all Pre-K and Head Start early educators are competitive wages in parity with similarly qualified K-12 teachers. In 2022, community Pre-K and Head Start teachers were making more than \$25,000 less annually than their public school counterparts. Competitive wages are necessary for retaining and recruiting highly qualified early educators. Rhode Island needs to invest in our early educators to reopen classrooms, decrease childcare costs, and shorten waiting lists.

These investments in Rhode Island's early education programs will yield long-term benefits, not only for our children, but also for their families, their teachers, their communities, and our state's economy. We urge passage.

¹ Head Start program reports to Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2014-2023. RI Pre-K enrollment for 2014 from National Institute for Early Education Research, The State of Preschool, 2015. RI Pre-K enrollment for 2015-2023 from Rhode Island Department of Education.