



Testimony Re: H-7934 Joint Resolution Supporting Continued Focus and Actions for Improved Coordination Between Agencies Responsible for Early Childhood and Early Learning
Senate Education Committee
April 9, 2024
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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports Representative Caldwell's resolution H-7934 which requests that the Children's Cabinet have an Open Meeting before September 2024 to review progress made toward the goals established in the [December 2023 RI Early Childhood Governance Systems Analysis Report](#).

The General Assembly established a seven member Rhode Island Working Group on Early Childhood and allocated \$250,000 to the Children's Cabinet to hire consultants who could help the Working Group determine whether or not a new cabinet-level Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning was needed or if any other changes were needed.

Both [Massachusetts](#) and [Connecticut](#) have centralized cabinet-level offices of early care and learning.

The Working Group was made up of 6 state agencies and 1 non-governmental agency – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. The final recommendation to continue Rhode Island's existing practice of working to coordinate early childhood policies and funding spread across separate agencies under separate leadership was endorsed by the six government agencies but opposed by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

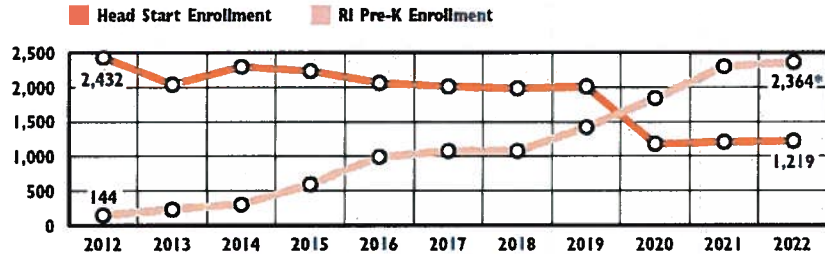
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT appreciates the effort the state has been making for decades to coordinate policies and funding across agencies, but we are not making as much progress as we should to ensure all young children, from infancy through kindergarten have access to high-quality early care and learning opportunities, including specialized services for children with the greatest needs.

During the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge, Rhode Island used federal funds and worked for years to develop an integrated early childhood database known as ECEDS which was never fully functional and has been dismantled. See the [2018 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Issue Brief on Integrated Early Care and Education Data](#) which recommended the state consider establishing a state Office of Early Learning to promote coordination, collaborative decision-making, and shared data and resources across the core early childhood programs. Improved state governance is needed to promote the use of integrated early care and education data.

Despite several federal grants, Rhode Island has also made very limited progress in developing and implementing a Kindergarten Entry Assessment system to support children's development and learning in kindergarten and also to identify systemic needs to improve access to high-quality early learning programs. [As of 2021, at least 30 states had a functional Kindergarten Entry Assessment system in place.](#)

As the state has invested in RI Pre-K, we have seen a significant decline in participation in Head Start due to staff vacancies causing closed classrooms.

Head Start and RI Pre-K Enrollment, 2012-2022



Sources: Head Start program reports to Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2012-2022. RI Pre-K enrollment for 2012 to 2014 from National Institute for Early Education Research, *The State of Preschool 2013, 2014, 2015*. RI Pre-K enrollment for 2015 to 2022 from Rhode Island Department of Education. *Some children are dually enrolled in Head Start and RI Pre-K – 140 in 2019, 176 in 2020, 253 in 2021, and 294 in 2022.

As Rhode Island seeks to expand access to Pre-K we have seen continued disinvestment in the Child Care Assistance Program. Rhode Island currently has the lowest family income cut off for Child Care Assistance in the Northeast.

STATE	FAMILY INCOME ELIGIBILITY LIMIT
Vermont*	\$142,945
Maine*	\$103,860
New Hampshire	\$89,180
New York	\$69,090
Connecticut	\$67,124
Massachusetts	\$57,093
Rhode Island	\$49,720

As outlined in the Rhode Island Working Group report:

*“Other states seeking policy coherence and political leadership in early childhood have moved to unify the oversight of early education and care services – either within a larger agency, or as a standalone agency focused on early childhood. Since the turn of the century **almost half the states have adopted governance structures that put state pre-k and child care in the same agency, with the goal of improving service delivery and advancing outcomes for children and families.***

*States that have accomplished a unification generally find that it allows them to **execute the core functions of the system more effectively.** These functions include engaging with stakeholders, managing finances, setting standards for service quality, supporting professionals, and communicating with the public. Over the long-term states have found these benefits to be substantial.*

*Beyond that, states changing governance have sought to create a more elevated leadership in their early childhood system. That can lead to the **state having a more coherent vision for its system, and the means to successfully implement that vision.** It can add political muscle to the early childhood community, both within the executive branch and in engaging the legislature. And it can better support staff in developing expertise about the entirety of the early childhood system, rather than just individual programs.”*

We thank the General Assembly for establishing a Working Group on Early Childhood Governance and for appointing Rhode Island KIDS COUNT to the Working Group. We thank Senator Gallo for providing the leadership needed to improve early childhood governance and systems for young children and families.

We urge passage of this resolution, and we are ready to work with state agency leaders, the Children’s Cabinet, and the Governor’s office to move forward with the recommendations in the Working Group report.