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**Testimony Re: S-2512, Rhode Island Early
Childhood IDEA Task Force**

Senate Education Committee

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT coordinates the Right from the Start Campaign, a state policy coalition led by eight organizations to advance state policies and budget priorities that help babies and young children get off to the right start.

Both Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign strongly support Senator Valverde's bill, S-2512, to create and fund an Early Childhood IDEA Task force to develop recommendations, including adequate staffing and financing, to meet the needs of babies and young children who have developmental delays and disabilities.

Families with babies and young children across the state are facing significant delays and disruptions in receiving Early Intervention (under age 3) and Preschool Special Education (ages 3 to K entry) services that are required under the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*.

The state needs a coherent Birth to Kindergarten IDEA plan which would include examining the design and delivery of services to children and the financing and staffing needed. Rhode Island could consider models used in other states including offering a Birth through 5 Early Intervention system and/or regionalizing preschool special education services so they can cross district lines and meet family needs. Rhode Island needs a plan to develop, attract, and retain qualified staff for these systems.

The Early Childhood IDEA system in Rhode Island is complicated and has not been adequately financed. The Early Intervention system is overseen by EOHHS and involves 9 agencies. The state allowed this system to go more than 20 years without a rate increase, leading to a staffing crisis and waiting lists. The preschool special education system is overseen by RIDE and involves 35 school districts, one state-operated school, and one charter school. Most school districts are screening only about one-third of the children they are supposed to screen. And many children are not receiving their services in inclusive settings.

Data as of mid-February indicate that there are 623 children who have been waiting for Early Intervention for more than 45 days. This is about one-third of the number of children typically enrolled in Early Intervention before the pandemic. School districts are also struggling to fill staff positions and meet their obligations and timelines to conduct screenings, complete evaluations, and provide services to children from age 3 up to kindergarten entry.

Babies, young children, and their families need an early childhood IDEA system that works. Early Intervention agencies and school districts need an early childhood IDEA system that works. We all pay the long-term costs when children do not get what they need to thrive.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.