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Testimony Re: H-7497 Relating to Education –
 Rhode Island Prekindergarten Education Act
 Senate Education Committee
 April 4, 2024
 Leanne Barrett, Senior Policy Analyst

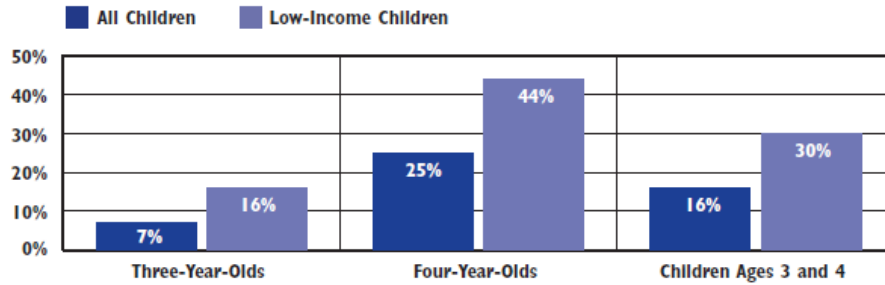


Rhode Island KIDS COUNT coordinates the Right from the Start Campaign, a state policy coalition led by eight organizations to advance state policies and budget priorities that help babies and young children get off to the right start.

Both Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign strongly support Representative McNamara’s bill to amend the RI Pre-Kindergarten Act, H-7497 to establish some guidelines for expansion.

Currently, about 16% of all children ages three and four and about 30% of low-income children ages three and four in Rhode Island are currently enrolled in high-quality public preschool, either Head Start, RI Pre-K, or both. Almost half of all low-income children age four are enrolled.

Percentage of Children Ages 3 and 4 Enrolled in Head Start and/or RI Pre-K, Rhode Island, 2023-2024



Source: Rhode Island KIDS COUNT calculations using October 2023 enrollment in Head Start and RI Pre-K as numerator and Census 2020 population of children ages 3 and 4 as denominator with low-income population estimated using the % of children receiving free or reduced-price lunch.

This bill would establish guidelines in statute to ensure that as RI Pre-K continues to expand that it will not harm and in fact will help to strengthen the state’s early care and education system.

There are five key guardrails that should be established as we move toward universal access to preschool.

One is that attention is needed to close the wage gap for RI Pre-K and Head Start preschool teachers, so they have pay parity with similarly qualified kindergarten teachers. **Right now, there is a \$25,000+ compensation gap, the 2nd largest gap in the United State according to data from the National Institute for Early Education Research.** We cannot expect our RI Pre-K classrooms and Head Start classrooms to continue to meet the highest quality standards in the nation with this kind of wage gap. It does not make sense to continue to expand this program without closing the compensation gap.

Another challenge is the fact that as RI Pre-K has expanded, preschool children's access to Head Start has declined, largely due to staffing crisis caused by a wage gap. (see attached trendline). Last year the General Assembly provided \$3 million in TANF funding to help address the staffing crisis in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. This funding restored the state's commitment to these proven programs after significant cuts in 2008. This funding has helped to raise teacher wages and reopen some closed classrooms. We need to make sure that as the RI Pre-K program grows, it is not at the expense of Early Head Start and Head Start. State funding for these programs needs to grow as RI Pre-K grows.

[Massachusetts provides annual state supplementary funding to Head Start and Early Head Start programs](#), to help programs meet their 20% non-federal match requirement and so programs can be fully staffed with qualified early educators.

Another growing problem is that access to child care assistance has declined as RI Pre-K has grown. Access to high-quality infant/toddler child care has also declined (only 18% of infants and toddlers with a child care subsidy were enrolled in a high-quality program in 2023 compared with 21% in 2022 and 22% in 2021). **A 30% infant/toddler funding set-aside should be established in state law to ensure that as preschool is expanded, the state also expands access to high-quality infant and toddler child care and early learning.** The 2022 RI Pre-K expansion plan commissioned by the General Assembly includes a recommendation to establish an infant/toddler funding set-aside like one in place in Illinois. [The RI Pre-K expansion plan recommendation to include a 30% infant/toddler set-aside has been highlighted nationally as a strategy that works to prevent unintended, negative consequences caused by Pre-K expansion.](#)

We continue to hear from family child care providers that they are excluded from the RI Pre-K system and from families who face enrollment challenges due to residency restrictions. Updating the statute to address these challenges is necessary.

Thank you, Senator Gallo, for sponsoring this legislation. We are eager to support investments that help expand access to high-quality early learning opportunities for all babies and young children. We are eager to see our RI Pre-K program grow alongside our Head Start, Early Head Start, and Child Care Assistance programs as part of a strong Birth through Grade 3 early education and care system.

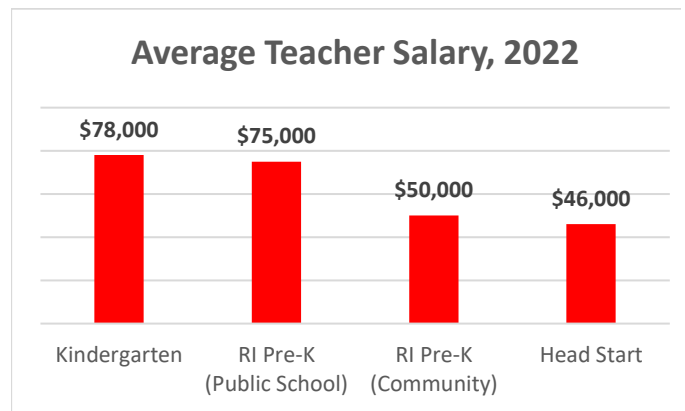
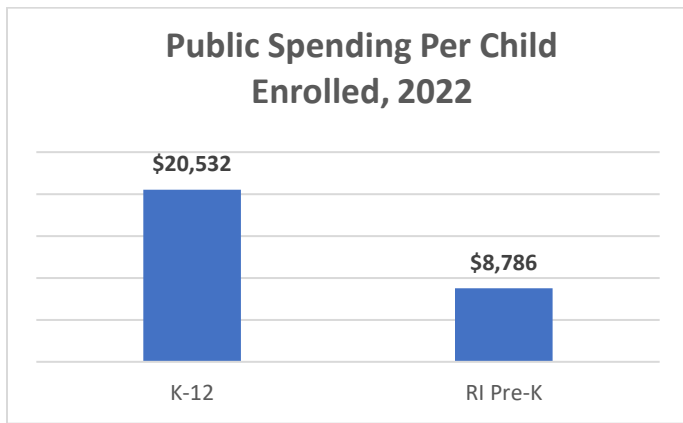
Expanding RI Pre-K Equitably in Birth to 5 Early Care and Education System 2024

[H-7497](#) (McNamara) & [S-2843](#) (Gallo)



Right from the Start

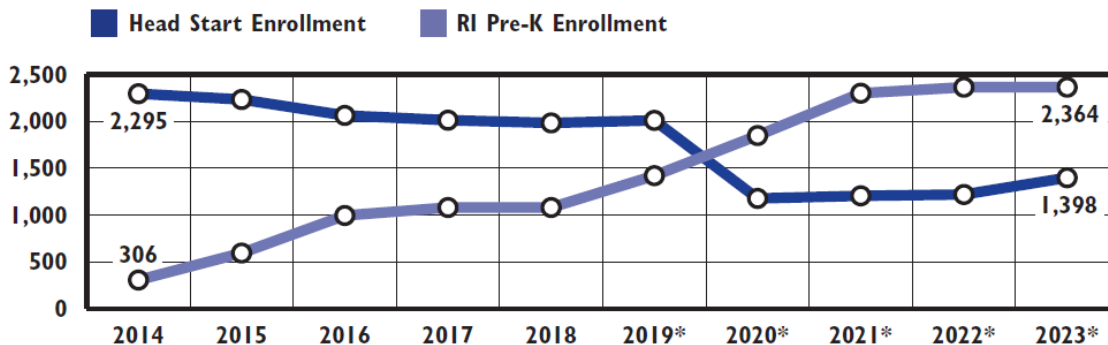
The [2022 RI Pre-K Expansion Report](#) commissioned by the General Assembly points out that expansion requires careful planning and implementation to ensure equity and sustainability. The RI Pre-K model has expanded without attention to the funding needed to provide compensation parity for teachers and without attention to the investments needed to sustain and expand access to other essential parts of the early care and education system., particularly infant and toddler care. While expanding Pre-K can be an excellent option to expand early education, it should not come at the expense of access to child care and other early learning programs.



RI Pre-K Expansion & the Rhode Island Early Care and Education System.

Without adequate investments in the entire early care and education system, state pre-k expansion can lead to reduced access to other early care and education options for children of all ages. **Since 2014, the number of Rhode Island children ages 0-12 receiving a child care subsidy has declined by 29% and the number of children ages 3-4 enrolled in Head Start has declined by 39% while enrollment in Pre-K has climbed.**

Head Start and RI Pre-K Enrollment, 2014-2023



Sources: 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 to 2023 from Rhode Island Department of Education. *Starting in 2019, some children were dually enrolled in in Head Start and RI Pre-K -- 140 in 2019, 176 in 2020, 253 in 2021, 294 in 2022, and 285 in 2023.

Infants and Toddlers Can Be Left Behind

Expansion of public Pre-K in New York City resulted in a reduction of 2,700 spots for infants and toddlers, entirely in areas with concentrated poverty. The RI Pre-K expansion plan recommends an infant/toddler spending set-aside, like one in place in Illinois, to sustain and grow the infant/toddler early care and education system. [This recommendation was highlighted in a national report as an important strategy to strengthen infant and toddler care during Pre-K expansion.](#)

Access to Child Care Assistance Has Declined as RI Pre-K Expanded

- Rhode Island's Child Care Assistance Program helps only half the number of families it helped 20 years ago.
- Rhode Island has cut \$46 million in state general revenue from the Child Care Assistance program over the last 20 years.
- Rhode Island currently has the lowest family income limit in the Northeast for child care assistance.
- Since 2014, the number of infants and toddlers receiving a child care subsidy has dropped by 27%, the number of children ages 3 through 5 has dropped by 29%, and the number of school-age children has dropped by 32%.

STATE	FAMILY INCOME ELIGIBILITY LIMIT 2023
Vermont	\$142,945
Maine	\$103,860
New Hampshire	\$89,180
New York	\$69,090
Connecticut	\$67,124
Massachusetts	\$57,093
Rhode Island	\$49,720

2024 RI Pre-K Legislation Requires that as RI Pre-K is Expanded

1. The state would **ensure that RI Pre-K teachers and Head Start preschool teachers are paid competitive wages comparable to similarly qualified K-12 educators** so they can keep classrooms open by attracting and retaining qualified staff to meet nationally-recognized quality standards.
2. The state would **increase investments in Head Start and Early Head Start** to sustain and expand access to these proven, high-quality, comprehensive early care and education models that help the whole family.
3. The state would provide a **30% infant/toddler funding set-aside to sustain and strengthen access to high-quality early care and education options for infants and toddlers**. For every \$10 in new state general revenue invested in RI Pre-K expansion, \$3 in new state general revenue would be invested in infant and toddler early care and education, including child care and Early Head Start.
4. The state would **support and allow family child care providers to receive RI Pre-K funding to deliver high-quality learning opportunities for children ages 3 and 4**.
5. The state would ensure that **all families, including those with developmental delays and disabilities, can make choices among high-quality preschool options** by removing residency restrictions for community-based RI Pre-K classrooms.