

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, December 13, 2023 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rhode Island

188 Valley Street, Suite 125

Providence, RI

Meeting Summary

AGENDA SUMMARY

The Early Learning Council's agenda addressed the following topics:

- Welcome, Opening Remarks, and Meeting Overview
- Updates/Discussion: Early Childhood System Analysis and Governance Working Group Recommendation Report
- Rhode Island Early Learning Council Review and Vote
- Federal Office of Head Start Notice of Proposed Rulemaking
- Open Call for 2024 Early Learning Council Agenda Ideas
- Announcements and Public comment

KEY POINTS

Key discussion points from the meeting are summarized below:

WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS, AND MEETING OVERVIEW

Director Kimberly Merolla-Brito, Deputy Commissioner Lisa Odom-Villela, and Paige Clausius-Parks welcomed the Council. (See slides). The following comments were made:

- The mission of the Early Learning Council is to improve early learning development and outcomes for children ages Birth to 8. We strive to increase access to high quality early learning programs, especially for children from low-income families, who are the most vulnerable members of our community.
- The Early Learning Council advises the governor's office.

UPDATES/DISCUSSION: EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM ANALYSIS AND GOVERNANCE WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATION REPORT

Kayla Rosen, Elliott Regenstein and Nasha Patel updated the Council on the Early Childhood Governance Group and led the discussion. (See slides.) The following comments and questions were made:

- The working group is meeting later today to vote on the final report and its proposed recommendations.
- The report is posted on the Children's Cabinet's website: <http://kids.ri.gov/cabinet/governance-analysis/>
- We appreciate everyone's feedback and input at every stage of this long process.
- The interim draft discussed at the last Early Learning Council meeting did not contain any path forward for achieving recommendations. The new version does.

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- There is widespread agreement amongst everyone about what needs to be accomplished for a strong early learning sector, despite differing opinions on which model is best for achieving those results.
- The working group, comprised mostly of state agencies, decided that, at this time, strengthening the current coordinated model of governance is the best way to achieve the goals for the state's early childhood system, notwithstanding the Early Learning Council's survey results, which determined that many in the industry would prefer a created governance model.
- Ultimately, it will be up to the General Assembly and the governor to decide on the governance structure for early childhood education.
- A fiscal analysis of the RI early childhood system was conducted as part of the final report. That analysis determined the cost to run a governance system and what it would cost to transition the governance system into one of the other models, consolidated or created. That cost was significant, but not astronomical.
- It is recommended that data be used to strengthen problem identification and solving.
- Families should be able to access the early childhood system through a single method, e.g., a website or app.
- There is work to be done regardless of the governance model chosen.
- Q: With respect to the recommendation to unify definitions of quality across programs, what programs are you referring to, e.g., public schools, preschools, all licensed?
A: That recommendation is written broadly intentionally to encompass whatever the state ultimately decides should be included. It recognizes that there is value in consistency across programs. Requirements might not be the same for everything across programs, but it makes sense to harmonize requirements where possible, especially with respect to funding streams. Conversations with providers and families will help identify competing requirements that create friction impeding work.
- COMMENT: We should provide holistic annual reports on spending and how it affects performance outcomes. We should think about how everything affects each other and be proactive about where to put money. The early childhood system is fragile.

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- COMMENT: The estimated cost for a governance transition is high (over \$1 million) and that money could go directly into the system instead of transitioning governance.
 - Some feel that a one-time cost is worth it if it makes the system more efficient or improves it in other ways.
- Q: With respect to lessons learned, ROI, and efficiencies, for example, how does this transition compare to the recent governance transition at the Department of Housing?
A: The report was more directly influenced by conversations with other states that have gone through a governance transition for early childhood.
- Q: Is there concrete data from other states about the benefit of a governance transition?
A: No, because every state has different goals going into the governance transition, so it is hard to quantify the impact. For example, some states hope to get more funding for services, operate more efficiently, or expand a mixed delivery system. Each of those states needs to determine according to their own methods whether their governance transition helped them achieve their end goals. There will never be a definitive statement that a new system is “better.”
- Governance is a process not an event. We can change the model in a few years if we determine that our decision now is not achieving our goals.
- COMMENT: The work group is recommending that we stay in a coordinated model, the Early Learning Council is voting on transitioning to a created model, and the governor/General Assembly will make the final decision. The first step is to approve a set of recommendations to ensure people are on the same page. The next step is to develop an action plan under each recommendation to determine who is responsible and what is the timeline.

RHODE ISLAND EARLY LEARNING COUNCIL REVIEW AND VOTE

Leanne Barrett reviewed the final draft Early Learning Council Governance recommendation on to create a new agency that was developed over the past month and led the vote after a determination that a quorum was present.

- Recommendation for vote (moved by Mary Varr, seconded by Pam High):
 - Rhode Island should create a new cabinet-level RI Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning charged with developing a high-quality child care and public preschool system for families statewide and overseeing child care & early learning licensing/quality, the Child Care Assistance Program, Early Head Start/Head Start Collaboration and RI Pre-K. Rhode Island should consider moving other early childhood systems to this new office in a later phase.

The creation of this new office should be contingent on:

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- A one-year transition timeline and adequate resources to ensure there is no risk of disruption to systems that children and families depend on to enroll and participate in early care and education programs and no risk of disruption to systems that early care and education providers need to get paid for their services.
 - Strong leadership, including a Director with a deep understanding of early childhood systems – particularly child care, Head Start/Early Head Start, and Pre-K – and a strong track record of positive engagement with the early childhood community.
 - Sufficient resources to attract and retain effective leadership and highly competent staff (recommend matching the RI Department of Education’s compensation package and wage scale). All existing state staff should be given every opportunity to be considered for positions in the new agency.
 - Structures (such as a board of directors) to ensure the office has power to adopt and revise policies, request and allocate resources, and improve systems for children, families, programs, and frontline staff. The RI Early Learning Council, which has been meeting since 2010 and meets the federal requirements for a State Advisory Council on Early Care and Education, should be a key advisory body for the Office and the Board.
- VOTE went as follows:
 - Commissioner, RIDE
 - **NO**
 - COMMENT: Collaboration is important, and we should improve and expand our current model.
 - Director, Rhode Island Department of Human Services
 - **NO**
 - COMMENT: We should expand on our existing coordinated model and establish action items with deliverable, measurable plans for each gap. Through accountability we can improve our current coordinated model.
 - Executive Director, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
 - **YES**
 - COMMENT: A strong separate department intentionally focused on early childhood systems provides the best opportunity for expanding access to high quality early learning programs and will provide a higher level of exposure for our early childhood system.
 - CCRI
 - **YES**
 - COMMENT: A created governance model will provide more opportunities for collaboration.
 - RI Afterschool Network

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- **ABSTAIN**
- Head Start Collaboration/DHS
 - **ABSTAIN**
- Early Childhood Special Education Leadership Association
 - **ABSTAIN**
- Economic Progress Institute
 - **YES**
- Family Child Care Union/SEIU
 - **ABSTAIN**
 - **COMMENT:** Providers need more information about what resources and benefits will be available to them under this recommendation.
- LISC
 - **NO**
 - **COMMENT:** This vote is based on current data and the conditions of the early childhood sector.
- URI
 - **NO**
- EOHHS
 - **ABSTAIN**
- DCYF – Early Childhood
 - **ABSTAIN**
- Center for Early Learning Professionals
 - **NO**
 - **COMMENT:** Recognizing the strengths of our current governance model and the collaboration we have seen between state agencies, taken together with the concrete and actionable recommendations of the working group, we do not believe a created governance model is the most effective path forward at this time.
- RI Children’s Cabinet/Governor’s Office
 - **ABSTAIN**
- Beautiful Beginnings
 - **NO**
 - **COMMENT:** This vote is based on the current state of the early childhood sector and budget considerations. Creating a new agency now is not the right time.
- Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
 - **YES**
- RIAAYC
 - **NO**
 - **COMMENT:** The timing is not right. The system needs to stabilize first under the current model and the working group recommendations.

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- RI Child Care Directors Association
 - **NO**
 - COMMENT: For now, we should support the current model and revisit this later when the system is more stable.
- RI Head Start Association
 - **YES**
 - COMMENT: Early childhood should be a priority within a single state office.
- Over the Rainbow Learning Centers
 - **YES**
 - COMMENT: One state agency for early childhood would be easier for families to navigate.
- DHS Child Care Administrator
 - **ABSTAIN**
- RI Chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics
 - **YES**
 - COMMENT: A single office increases the visibility and voice of the Early Learning Council.
- RIDE – Pre-K
 - **ABSTAIN**
- NOT VOTING (ABSENT or on ZOOM so not available for in-person vote):
 - RIDOH – Family Home Visiting
 - Meeting Street
 - EI Interagency Coordinating Council
 - RI School Superintendents Association
 - RIDE – Title I & McKinney Vento
 - RI Foundation
 - Family Child Care Homes of RI
 - Parent
 - United Way of Rhode Island
 - Rhode Island College
 - RIDE – Preschool Special Education
 - RI Association for Infant Mental Health
 - RI Association of School Principals
- **FINAL TALLY:**
 - YES: 7
 - NO: 8
 - ABSTAIN: 9
- Recommendation not passed. There will be no recommendation from the RI Early Learning Council to the RI Early Childhood Governance Task Force

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- At any time, the Early Learning Council can revisit a recommendation on governance.

FEDERAL OFFICE OF HEAD START NOTICE OF PROPOSED RULEMAKING

Catherine Green explained the proposed rulemaking changes from the federal Office of Head Start. Comments and questions included the following:

- The proposed changes to the Head Start Program Standards are in three sections:
 - Workforce
 - The proposed changes seek to increase compensation and ensure Early Head Start and Head Start teachers are compensated at equitable rates through established pay scales and that their compensation is in alignment with K through 3rd grade educators. This must be achieved by August 2031.
 - Mental Health
 - The proposed changes will require a multi-disciplinary mental health team that is responsible for program wide activities for both students and educators.
 - Quality Program Improvement
 - The proposed changes will establish a maximum caseload for Early Head Start/Head Start family workers. Family workers provide comprehensive support services to families, such as helping families to access housing supports and DHS benefits, etc.
- Comments on these proposed changes are important and the federal Office of Head Start takes comments very seriously, making changes based on those comments, so please review the documents.
- The Office of Head Start is offering a series of webinars to collect input from Head Start programs across the country. The national Head Start Association is doing the same. Additionally, some working groups are taking a deep dive into the performance standards.
- Although the community is embracing these proposed changes as generally positive, there are some concerns that they are very prescriptive and could lead to unfunded mandates. Pay parity with the public school system and wage scales are great, but not without funding help from the government. Already 55% of Head Start programs nationwide have reduced slots to meet requirements, so additional requirements without more funding could lead to further reduction in Head Start slots. That reduction would put more young children at risk of not receiving needed services.
- Q: Head Start programs needed to reduce slots to increase wages. How is that going?
A: Programs have already made their cuts in slots to meet new mandates and will have to cut more to meet these proposed changes. The more slots cut, the more families will not receive

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needed services, which will have a terrible effect in the future when parents and students will not be ready for public school.

- COMMENT: The national Infant Toddler Coordinators Association will be submitting comments based on the same concerns raised here today. We want to support a viable workforce, but not at the risk of more children not receiving services.

OPEN CALL FOR 2024 EARLY LEARNING COUNCIL AGENDA IDEAS

Leanne Barrett requested ideas for the 2024 Early Learning Council agenda. Suggestions included:

- The CCDF plan is due on July 1st, so we could review the plan at the March meeting to collect feedback and recommendations from the Early Learning Council.
- Recognizing that this is a regular Early Learning Council agenda topic, we should continue to have agenda items related to the workforce, such as discussions on how to expand the workforce pipeline, increase workforce compensation, improve workforce retention, and offer new workforce trainings. This can include checking in on the workforce registry.
- There should be a standing agenda item reporting out on a measurable action plan for the recommendations in the working group report, including who is responsible for each recommendation.
- We can discuss programs that could address the crisis situations currently faced by many families and early childhood staff.
- The Early Learning Council could discuss the EOHHS Infant Toddler Mental Health Recommendation Plan due in June 2024 so it can provide feedback as part of an iterative process.
- The Council can discuss ways to help parents learn to advocate better for themselves and their children as they navigate the educational system. Because we are a small state, it would be easy to bring multiple parents together for a program.
- A future agenda item could be a discussion of trends and issues faced by centers that can be relieved by new designs of their physical spaces. For example, LISC is designing spaces to accommodate neurodiversity. LISC is also helping staff retention by creating spaces that reduce some of the common issues teachers face when working in spaces not conducive to teaching.
- We can discuss the membership of the Early Learning Council to consider whether it should include more voices from frontline staff and families served.

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- NOTE: Council membership is determined by the governor and was last refreshed in May 2020. A presenter does not need to be a member of the council and any member of the public can attend meetings.
- We can discuss the voting structure of the Council given its role as an advisory group to the state government. What is the role of state agencies on the Council? We need to ensure that community voices are heard with government agencies at the same table.
- We could try to clarify the roles of the Early Learning Council and the Children’s Cabinet so they can each best serve the early childhood system.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- URI is offering a new online early childhood and education program for working professionals. T.E.A.C.H. scholarship benefits are available for the program. Priority applications are being accepted now until April 26, 2024. The second deadline will be in August.
- KIDS COUNT is accepting submissions for poetry from RI children and families for possible inclusion in the 2024 Fact Book. Poetry must be less than 100 words and related to topics in the Fact Book. Submissions must be received by the second week in January and authors selected will receive a stipend. Look for more information through email and social media.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no comments from the public.