

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, December 9, 2020 9:00 a.m.-11:00 p.m.

Virtual Meeting

Meeting Summary

AGENDA SUMMARY

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

- Welcome, Opening Remarks, and Meeting Overview
- Updates & Discussion: Current Status of Early Childhood Systems During COVID-19 Pandemic
- Early Years/Early Grades Alignment Work Group
- Child Care
- Right from the Start Campaign
- Announcements and Public comment

KEY POINTS

Key discussion points from the meeting are summarized below:

WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS, AND MEETING OVERVIEW

Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green, Director Courtney Hawkins and Elizabeth Burke Bryant welcomed the Council. (See slides). The following comments and questions were made:

- Director Hawkins explained that the state has approved additional P-EBT benefits to SNAP households. Payments are retroactive to the beginning of the school year. The governor also approved additional benefits to help families during the pandemic. Families received twice their RI Works benefits this month and families receiving SNAP benefits will receive an extra \$600 EBT benefit by the end of this week. We are grateful to the governor for recognizing that families are struggling during this difficult time.
- Starting this week, all early learning programs will have access to COVID-19 testing through the K-12 COVID-19 testing system and families are encouraged to take advantage of that opportunity.
- The 2021 Child Care Market Rate Survey will collect information on the impact of COVID-19 and what types of recovery supports families and programs will need to strengthen the system as we move forward.
- Commissioner Infante-Green explained that the surveillance testing pilot conducted in four districts demonstrates that COVID-19 is not being spread in schools. By second semester, the state hopes that all districts will be able to offer their own surveillance testing for asymptomatic people.
- RIDE prioritized transition grades for in-person instruction this year and schools successfully opened those grades.
- When schools have had to close, it has been because of staffing issues not because of community spread. To avoid such closures, the state has hired hundreds of substitute teachers. The youngest learners as well as multi-lingual and differently-abled students are the most negatively impacted by school closures.

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- In partnership with Yale University, RIDE is offering mental health training for all educators and others who interact with children at all levels, Pre-K through 12. The online training is available free of charge. Participants will receive a certificate upon completion.
- Kids' Link RI has increased capacity for children experiencing mental health issues due to COVID-19. The state is monitoring the limited capacity for inpatient psychiatric services for children in Rhode Island.

UPDATES & DISCUSSION: CURRENT STATUS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Family Home Visiting

- Blythe Berger reported that family home visiting agencies are continuing to provide a mix of virtual and in-person visits.
- In some ways, the family home visiting process is easier for families to utilize now that is virtual.
- Agencies are still adhering to curriculum, but they are also providing basic needs like procuring clothes and food for families who require it.
- State guidance and agency policy determine when in-person visitation can occur.
- Families need more social emotional support now.
- Agencies received additional grant funding to assist with costs incurred when families attend well visits, e.g., transportation expenses.
- Q: Currently, the stress on families is acute especially where families must determine the logistics of distance/in-person learning for multiple children. Additionally, there is job stress in situations where families cannot perform jobs virtually. Eventually the mental health piece will turn into an economic piece. How are family home visiting agencies addressing the mental health of families and children?
A: Mental health is always important in family home visiting because it involves the most vulnerable families. Each agency has imbedded line items to address mental health issues. Furthermore, agencies are trying to address issues proactively by alleviating the specific COVID-19 related concerns that are causing additional mental stress.
- COMMENT: RIAIMH is expanding to meet community needs related to infant/early childhood mental health consultation as well as professional development and training for providers. RIAIMH has hired four consultants to work with family home visiting agencies across the state. RIAIMH is working with family home visiting staff to help them better understand infant mental health principles and the ideas that they can bring to families even through virtual meetings. Moreover, RIAIMH has worked hard supporting staff in recognizing and interpreting what they are observing. In addition, RIAIMH has supported staff in how to regulate themselves when they are hearing difficult stories.

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- COMMENT: Mental health clinicians at Meeting Street conduct weekly open hours on Zoom to assist staff in providing what families need. The clinicians also help staff members if they are feeling stressed.

Early Intervention (IDEA Part C)

- Jennifer Kaufman explained that EI is operating similarly to family home visiting. Many of the same agencies offer both EI and family home visiting.
- EI staff learned how to provide services via telehealth and learned the electronic processes required to ensure families receive and complete the paperwork required by IDEA Part C.
- During the pandemic, EI staff is connecting families to necessary community resources while also helping families meet their basic needs.
- Agencies are operating at approximately 75% of pre-COVID-19 staffing levels because of furloughs prompted by a reduction in referrals. Current referrals are at 80% of pre-COVID-19 referral levels. As families have returned to visiting pediatricians, referrals have increased. All nine EI programs are open and accepting referrals.
- RIPIN partners engaged in outreach to community partners, which resulted in a slight increase in referrals.
- EI face to face visits increased over the summer, but have decreased to approximately 90% telehealth due to the weather and uptick in RI COVID cases. EI has prioritized in-person visiting for those activities that cannot be conducted via telehealth, for families with poor access to technology, and families who are at high-risk for disengagement.
- Agencies have been creative in maintaining social distancing. For example, they distributed evaluation materials to children's houses so families can perform and record an evaluation as part of a telehealth visit.
- The transition to IDEA services provided by public schools at age 3 is occurring on the same timeline as before except the meetings are now virtual.
- EI providers are focused on ensuring that families have what they need right now, whether it be a tangible resource or a support group.
- COMMENT: Dr. Pam High will help inform pediatricians that EI is open and receiving referrals. Jennifer Kaufman will send Dr. High informational pamphlets that pediatricians can distribute to families. The pamphlets describe what EI looks like during this time.

Preschool Special Education

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- Ruth Gallucci explained that, despite the impact of COVID-19, the laws and requirements for preschool special education have not changed and RIDE still expects districts to provide the necessary services for differently-abled children, ages 3 to 21. How districts provide services has changed, however.
- Districts have to ensure access to general services and IEP based services even when districts are distance learning.
- Families and districts are working collaboratively.
- Referral meetings are happening virtually.
- Although many programs for children are providing in-person instruction, COVID-19 restrictions related to stable pods often prevent special education providers from entering programs to deliver services. As a result, even when a student is in school, that child may be receive special education services virtually.
- In situations where children receiving special education services are participating in distance learning, programs have partnered with families and teachers to provide learning opportunities imbedded within home and classroom activities.
- The pandemic has helped educators develop virtual collaboration skills.
- RIDE has provided every school district with online assessment tools so Child Outreach can continue to screen and identify children who need special education services. Child Outreach screening numbers are low, however, and RIDE is working hard to bring the numbers back up so it can find those children that need additional supports.
- RIDE will provide enrollment numbers for children in early childhood special education after it receives the December census data.

Licensed Child Care Programs

- Nicole Chiello explained that the DHS Child Care Licensing Unit and BrightStars have visited over 750 providers since June 1st and they plan on doing an in-person visit for every licensed provider before the end of the year.
- Since June 1st, 11 new family child care providers (8 pending application) and 17 new child care center sites have opened.

Child Care Assistance Program

- Hannah Hansen described the continued CCAP payment practices that are helping CCAP providers function during the pandemic.

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- Since the beginning of the pandemic, CCAP reimbursement has been based on enrollment and not attendance. Furthermore, the state has waived the allowable absence policy for CCAP families and CCAP subsidies are at an enhanced rate. These changes are temporary to help CCAP providers provide necessary services during this difficult time.
- From March pre-COVID-19 to October, there was a 37% decline in CCAP enrollment, which reinforces the need for enhanced CCAP payment practices. During that same period, absenteeism increase from 4% to 20%, thereby supporting the need to waive the allowable absence policy.

Early Head Start/Head Start

- Mary Varr reported that the number of children testing positive in school is low and that spread is not occurring in classrooms. Classroom closures are due to staffing issues and not illness in children. The best place for children is in classrooms.
- Early Head Start and Head Start enrollment changes daily and some locations have waiting lists.
- In Woonsocket, Head Start and the public school system engaged in shared professional development for Pre-K, Head Start and Kindergarten teachers.

RI Pre-K

- Lisa Nugent reported that RIDE opened 100 State Pre-K classrooms on September 14th and 98 of those classrooms were operating in-person for full-day learning.
- RIDE is closely tracking and monitoring closures. Of the 100 classrooms, only 30 classrooms had to close for quarantine and all reopened with no signs of secondary spread.
- If adults would follow the rules, classrooms would be better off.
- Enrollment is a little lower than before COVID-19 because some families are not feeling safe coming to school and/or families have other children at home, which complicates the logistics of attending in-person Pre-K.
- Three new communities added State pre-K classrooms, Westerly, North Kingstown and Middletown.
- State Pre-K programs are teaching and providing services for children as well as nurturing and feeding them.
- Q: Does the State Pre-K program need more referrals to increase enrollment?
A: Programs are still working on taking children off waitlists and placing them into programs. However, all communities continually accept referrals throughout the year until March. Pediatricians can make referrals directly to programs and families with eligible children should apply to all programs listed on the RIDE website because spots open at different programs at various times throughout the school year.

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Public School PK – Grade 3

- Amy Donnelly Roche explained that COVID-19 requirements have caused significant changes to physical space that has varied based on location.
- Kindergarten classroom now look more like older classrooms because of the necessary modifications to centers and group play. Teachers are assigning bins of materials to individual children so that teachers can disinfect the materials after use. This practice allows play based learning to continue as part of the instruction.
- Some activities have moved outdoors.
- Districts are fogging playscapes and classrooms for disinfection. Teachers are also doing a significant amount of additional cleaning.
- Districts are expanding WIFI to outdoor spaces.
- A grant from RIDE supports online assessments by districts. These assessments are primarily for math and reading, but some districts have added social emotional assessments as well.
- Teachers rose to an amazing level of creativity, which has engaged and challenged students from the start.
- The new statewide calendar brought an opportunity for increased collaboration among districts, resulting in cost savings for required professional development opportunities.
- Bright spots in the COVID-19 crisis include the modernization of materials, the development of creative teaching strategies, and an increase in collaboration among districts.
- Q: What tools are schools using to measure SEL?
A: Each district chooses the tool it uses to measure SEL from those recommended on the CASEL.org website. All districts are utilizing assessment tools aligned with RIDE criteria for social emotional learning.

EARLY YEARS/EARLY GRADES ALIGNMENT WORK GROUP

Phyllis Lynch, Mary Varr and Celeste Bowler discussed Early Years/Early Grades Alignment Work Group. (See slides). Comments and questions included the following:

- If you have any research or state policy inquiries for ECS, please email Matt Weyer at mweyer@ecs.org.
- Over 19 members representing a wide range of stakeholders participated in workgroup sessions. The goal was to establish 4 to 6 high priority recommendations to help early childhood professionals continue to improve the systems that impact children from age 3 to grade 3.

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- The work group felt it was important to acknowledge the timing of these recommendations during a pandemic. Although it is not the ideal time to make new financial requests, the work is more important than ever because these systems are particularly impacted by COVID-19.
- Recommendation #1 is to support and diversify the workforce, including retaining diverse staff in early child care programs. To increase retention, the work group recommends that the state increase incentives. Creative pathways for certification would also help retain diverse staff, including offering courses in dual languages and providing credit for work experience. These plans might require monetary and/or people supports.
- Recommendation #2 is to promote consistent assessment and data sharing systems from preschool up to 3rd grade. Assessments would be similar to those available starting in 3rd grade. These assessments would not be used for accountability purposes but are intended to inform teaching and policy. The assessments would measure the whole child, including social emotional learning. The data governance piece of this recommendation would allow data sharing among agencies so the progress of children can be tracked through the school system beginning from the early years. KIDSNET and ECEDS are a start, but more is needed. The work group recommends convening an early childhood data governance committee. That committee would develop a plan of action by establishing the goals for integrating the data and identifying the currently shared data points. The plan would also include ways of overcoming recognized barriers to data sharing.
- Recommendation #3 addresses opportunities for enhanced professional development. The goal is to ensure common professional development for preschool to K educators in both RIELDS and the Kindergarten standards. Increased collaboration and understanding would improve transitions. All levels of educators, including principals and superintendents, need to understand early childhood development.
- ENDORSEMENT OF RECOMMENDATIONS: The Early Learning Council endorses the recommendations of the Early Years/Early Grades Alignment Work Group for presentation to the Children's Cabinet. Members of the Council voted as follows:
 - 29 people voted to support the recommendations with no changes
 - 1 person voted to support the recommendations but would like changes
 - 0 people voted reject the recommendations
- The workgroup will contact the person who voted to support the recommendations with modifications to see if they can improve the wording of the recommendations.

CHILD CARE

Catherine Green, Nicole Chiello and Hannah Hansen updated the Council on family child care policy priorities. (See slides). Key comments and questions included:

- In order to assist programs with increased costs during the pandemic, the state is reimbursing CCAP programs based on enrollment instead of attendance. In September, DHS started working with PCG to evaluate how the child care sector has been affected by COVID-19. DHS sent surveys to providers in October, November, and December to collect data from September, October, and

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November. Half of licensed providers submitted completed surveys in October and slightly less than that in November. DHS partnered with RIAEYC to administer the surveys, including providing support to 560 programs via phone.

- Because CCAP reimbursement is based temporarily on enrollment not attendance, DHS did not require programs to submit attendance data since March, which has resulted in a data gap between March and September. Although still being reimbursed based on enrollment, programs began submitting attendance data in September so DHS could analyze that information. That data indicates a significant drop in attendance by CCAP children at child care programs between March and September. Enrollment by CCAP children has also decreased since March.

Approximately 75% of licensed child care spots were utilized by families in September, as reported by PCG in the COVID Impact Analysis Survey.

- Q: How does the 37% decrease in enrollment on the CCAP enrollment slide compare to the 10% mentioned on the October Survey Analysis slide?
A: The 37% refers to the decrease in CCAP enrollment from before the pandemic in March to the recent data collections for September and October. The 10% refers to the overall decrease in the number of children enrolled in child care in October, including both CCAP children and private pay children.
- The decline in child care enrollment during the pandemic was due primarily to parent unemployment or to parents being nervous about enrolling children in child care.
- Once DHS collects data from the December survey, DHS will conduct a high-level analysis.
- The Pathways to Partnerships Project for infant/toddler child care providers will provide fixed funding to participants, unlike the current Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership model, to ensure participants have the necessary funding to focus on quality, particularly during these difficult times.
- The goal of the Pathways to Partnership Project is that at least 40% of participants will transition to becoming permanent Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership providers at the end of the grant cycle.
- For questions on the Pathways to Partnerships Project, contact Catherine, Catherine.Green@dhs.ri.gov, or Kristen Caine at Children’s Friend, kcaine@cfsri.org.

RIGHT FROM THE START CAMPAIGN

Rachel Flum and Leanne Barrett discussed the legislative and budget priorities for the Right to the Start Campaign. (See slides). The following comments were made:

- Everyone is encouraged to go to the Right from the Start webpage, <https://rightfromthestartri.org/>, and to follow Right from the Start on social media.

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- Many people involved in the Campaign support the Revenue for Rhode Island proposal to increase the tax rate for the top 1% of earners in the state.
- Making the increased reimbursement rates for CCAP permanent will cost an estimated \$12-18 million, which the state can fund through either federal or state sources.
- The House is releasing its FY21 budget today at 5 pm. Child care funding is included, but the details are unknown at this point. The House probably did not include revenue increases or programmatic changes given the financial situation in the state. The goal is to pass the budget before Christmas.
- The federal CARES Act helped fund the increased reimbursement for CCAP based on enrollment and not attendance.
- The second federal COVID-19 package, for \$908 billion, will hopefully be passed before Christmas. It includes \$82 billion for K-12, \$10 billion for child care, and an extension of unemployment benefits.
- The Campaign sent a letter to the Biden transition team to request the restoration of many items that existed under the Obama administration, such as improved coordination between the federal Department of Education and Office of Child Care and Head Start and the Department of Health and Human Services.
- The Campaign sent a letter to the Department of Health to post COVID-19 case data associated with the early child care sectors, like they do with the K-12 sector. The Campaign also requested that early child care providers have the same access to a COVID-19 vaccine as providers in the K-12 sector, and that receiving the vaccine be voluntary for both groups.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND PUBLIC COMMENT

Comments included:

- COMMENT: Among Spanish-speaking family child care providers, there is a lot of confusion over the questions on the DHS COVID-19 surveys. The translation of the questions is unclear, which may be resulting in inaccurate responses. To alleviate this confusion, both RIAEYC and DHS can assist providers with survey completion over the phone so any providers who are unsure how to respond should contact DHS or RIAEYC.
- COMMENT: Some family child care providers have experience technical problems with the CCAP reporting portal. DHS will look into this further to understand the issues.
- Elizabeth Burke Bryant reminded everyone that on Tuesday, December 15th from 9:30 – 11:30 a.m. Dr. Shantel Meek will be the keynote speaker at an event sponsored through a partnership with RI Reads and the United Way. She will be speaking on Start with Equity: From the Early Years to the Early Grades, a report from the Children's Equity Project and the Bipartisan Policy Center.

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- In partnership with DHS, RIC is graduating the first Birth to Three cohort in the B-3 Certificate of Undergraduate Studies. The program developed and used a RI-BEST Model for Spanish-speaking family child care providers. The cohort members have completed 16 credits in B-3.
- COMMENT: There continues to be many families that are having a hard time securing child care, especially for children with special healthcare needs. For example, a child who attended a special education school in Massachusetts was denied enrollment at every child care center in RI because the child went to school in Massachusetts.