

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, March 30, 2022, 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

Virtual Meeting

Meeting Summary

AGENDA SUMMARY

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

- Welcome, Opening Remarks, and Introduction
- Birth to 8 State Policy Update
- Prioritize Strategies and Provide Feedback on State's Early Childhood Care & Education Strategic Plan
- Discussion: Establishing a Cabinet Level Office for Early Childhood Development & Learning
- 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, Interim Director Yvette Mendez, and Elizabeth Burke Bryant welcomed the Council. (See slides). The following comments were made:

- RIDE has launched Let It Out, a robust mental health awareness campaign aimed at helping school communities. Children are under a lot of stress, which was amplified by the pandemic, and it is manifesting in different ways in the classroom. This campaign connects students with trusted members from their school community who can support them. More counselors are being hired, but it is hard to find counselors to fill the positions. Additional funding has enabled training for school staff in detecting and responding to mental health issues. Educators can access, at any time, a 10-hour training on mental health identification and support from Yale University and receive a certificate upon completion. The campaign also features classroom activities and education kits as well as informational materials and resources that help students cope with mental health challenges. More information about this campaign can be found at www.letitoutri.com.
- RIDE and DHS issued a joint letter to the Senate Committee on Education in support of the early childhood and development budget package under consideration. The legislative package helps accelerate progress to expand the quality of and access to programs across the birth to age 5 early learning continuum and addresses gaps in the system.
- COMMENT: If you know anyone who lives in West Virginia, have them call Senator Manchin and ask him to be sure child care and Pre-K are in the package they are working to pass.
- COMMENT: RIAEYC is working to schedule meetings with Senators Reed and Whitehouse in the coming weeks to continue to talk to them about federal early learning investments. If anyone is interested in participating in those meetings, please email Lisa at lhildebrand@riaeyc.org.
- DHS continues to work together to make affordable, high-quality child care more accessible for families and better for providers so they can remain open and meet licensing standards and will continue to serve children in the Child Care Assistance Program.

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BIRTH TO 8 STATE POLICY UPDATE

Kayla Rosen updated the Council on the Governor's proposed FY 23 State Budget. (See slides.) The following comments and questions were made:

- The FY2023 Governor's proposed budget was \$12.38 billion, with \$3.77 billion related to children and youth spending. There has been year over year increases in the amount of funding going towards kids in the state budget.
- There is a lot we need to do, but this is the strongest budget proposal for early childhood education and care that we have seen in a long time from a governor. We want to make as much progress as we can while we wait for federal funding to come through.
- There was a significant amount of one-time funding in the Governor's proposed budget for this year. Those nonrecurring sources of funding were used for strategic investments. The base budget remained approximately the same, however.
- All of the Governor's budget proposed rate increases for CCAP are higher than the current rate being paid and all, except school age, are above the pandemic rate. These proposed rates move us closer to the equal access standard in the Market Rate Survey.
- The Governor's budget proposal continues the retention bonuses and to offer this opportunity for increased compensation directly to the workforce.
- COMMENT: The retention bonuses have been very easy to apply for and early childhood educators are appreciative of this initiative.
- The Governor's budget proposal doubles the scholars that can participate in T.E.A.C.H.
- The Governor's budget proposal makes permanent the pilot for access to CCAP for full time college students. We are one of only 3 states that do not provide for this already.
- The Workforce Registry in the Governor's proposed budget would help us to know who is in the early education workforce, what their credentials are, where they are working, and how we can communicate with them about available opportunities.
- Q: Do we have data on the families that dropped off the Child Care Assistance Program? What happened to those families? Is it due to family income limits to qualify for CCAP and the fact that wages increased for many families? Where are they now and why are they not able to access the system?
A: The CCAP team and the Office of Child Care are looking into this and trying to get those families back into the system.

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- Please find a summary of the Governor's proposed FY23 investments here: <http://kids.ri.gov/cabinet/documents/FY23%20Early%20Childhood%20Care%20and%20Education%20Summary%20of%20Proposed%20Investments%20Final.pdf>

Leanne Barrett updated the Council on key proposed legislation for Birth to 8. (See slides.) The following comments were made:

- The Child Care Is Essential Act would build on and go beyond the governor's proposal to improve CCAP rates and expand CCAP eligibility. It would bring all CCAP rates to meet or exceed the federal equal access standard, where we used to be in the early 2000s. It also includes family child care homes in the rate increase and meets the equal access standard for school age, which the governor's proposal does not include.
- Child support enforcement is a huge barrier to CCAP eligibility and is not federally required. Only 12 states have this requirement. The Child Care is Essential Act would eliminate this statutory requirement in Rhode Island.
- The Early Educator Investment Act would advance the idea that professionals with comparable credentials working with young children in an educational capacity should have a similar wage scale. Infant toddler professionals need knowledge similar to Kindergarten and 1st grade teachers.
- Our current wage replacement at 60% for paid family leave is not sufficient because low wage families cannot afford to take the leave. There is a bill proposed that would increase the TCI wage replacement for low-wage workers.
- Amending the state constitution to include a right to adequate education would be an important tool to move us forward. It is how New Jersey became a leader in early child education.

PRIORITIZE STRATEGIES AND PROVIDE FEEDBACK ON STATE'S EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE & EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLAN

Kayla Rosen provided an overview of the plan and proposed updates. (See slides). Key comments and questions included the following:

- The state wants the Early Childhood Care and Education Strategic Plan to reflect the policies of the Early Learning Council so each year the state refreshes it to ensure it is a living document. The state takes all feedback into account when updating the document.
- Everyone should provide feedback by April 13th so the plan can be finalized at the end of April. Once finalized, it will be shared publicly at the Children's Cabinet and put on their website.
- Q: Are you piloting expanded models for infant and toddler care and education?
A: We are using the Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership federal model to support programs in increasing quality, with the goal of transitioning those programs into an Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership slot under a future federal expansion of funding for the model.

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- Q: Does the plan include increasing state funded Head Start slots?
A: It is not specifically listed, but that is helpful feedback.
- COMMENT: Make sure you more specifically address infants and toddlers.
- COMMENT: I might suggest a review of all strategies/actions to incorporate systems-based language and highlight our intentional commitment to diversity, equality, and belonging on the child/family and workforce levels.
- The feedback survey is for everyone, the Council and the public, and can be accessed here: <https://forms.gle/Ks9cxMtx69f2UpmJ8>.
- COMMENT: One thing that jumps out at me is there is no reference to economic insecurity or the effects of the COVID pandemic in the plan. I know economic insecurity is not usually included, but there is new research/recognition that children who struggle with food insecurity/economic insecurity will struggle to succeed in school and that the pandemic has impacted kids' ability to succeed.

DISCUSSION: ESTABLISHING A CABINET LEVEL OFFICE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT & LEARNING

Nora Crowley (RI Senate Policy Director), Blythe Keeler Robinson (early learning program provider from Georgia), and Amy O'Leary (advocate from Massachusetts) began the discussion on a new Cabinet level Office for Early Childhood Development and Learning. (See slides). Comments as proposed in a Senate bill and questions included:

- Implementation will take time to design, and we need to provide more clarity in roles, but our goal is to move towards a unified governance model.
- COMMENT: Please keep in mind the critical connection with early childhood special education providing services to 3- to 5-year-old prior to Kindergarten.
 - This is a great comment, and we need to address this by tightening up the language in the legislation proposal and thinking about it at implementation.
- COMMENT: Both Massachusetts and Georgia have had unified governance for child care and Pre-K for many years.
- Providers in the field in Massachusetts wanted a singular agency for governance to reduce the number of assessments coming from different agencies.
- The Massachusetts case study looked at the details and challenges of a combined early child care office. Governance does not solve everything, but having a single state agency elevated, consolidated, and accountable helps the entire early childhood education system. In

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Massachusetts, the governor appoints the boards for elementary, secondary, and higher education and the boards appoint the commissioners. The secretary of the Department of Early Education and Care serves on all the boards. Once Massachusetts established this unified office, it changed the perception of and conversation around early childhood education and care in the government and all future bills included birth to grade 12. It also helped clearly identify the lead for all grant opportunities.

- Here is the link to the Massachusetts case study full report:
http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/doc_research/08_Rennie_Case.pdf
- Here is the link to the Massachusetts executive summary:
http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/doc_research/08_Rennir_exSum.pdf
- Massachusetts established its Department of Early Education and Care through careful planning, input from the field, policy considerations, and understanding gaps and barriers.
- COMMENT: Both Massachusetts and Georgia have strong associations for infant mental health.
- COMMENT: I was a provider in Massachusetts when Amy was doing all this hard work and advocacy. From a provider's perspective, we were very appreciative to the state for legitimizing our field. It made a difference in my educators' pride in working in early childhood education.
- Georgia had a Pre-K program established before it established a Department of Early Care and Learning.
- Provider voice is important. Things fall through the cracks when providers must answer to several places. It helps to have one unified department with a commissioner with high status in the state. It makes for a more family friendly environment because there is just one department to go to for subsidies and supports. It is also easier for teachers to just go to one place for resources.
- Q: Has higher education been involved in the various initiatives?
A: In Georgia, there is a close connection with the technical college and university system as it relates to training and teacher programs. Representatives from that group were involved in the early learning conversations. In Massachusetts, there was an early educator scholarship created and higher education experts worked to implement that program as part of the governance of the Department of Early Education and Care. In Rhode Island, the bill includes a seat for a post-secondary commissioner. A representative from higher education must be at the table to ensure workforce coordination.
- COMMENT: In Rhode Island, the child care system is governed with Rhode Island Works and is considered "cash assistance" to low income families. Therefore, child care is not always recognized as part of an early learning system or afterschool/summer learning program.

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- COMMENT: We have kicked around this idea for 15 years and have struggled with who should be the lead among the existing departments. This proposal brings it to a different level. It is about empowering the profession, so they are not looked at as caregiver but as educators. We need higher education to buy in to continue to professionalize the profession.
- Q: In Georgia, I understand there is a research component to DECAL. Has that been helpful in gathering good data about the field?
A: It has been good at gathering data about the field and where we need to make investments and improvements. DECAL also does a great job in sharing data with the provider community and the public, so everyone understands how we are doing and where providers need to make changes.
- Massachusetts could have had better collaboration during COVID. Just having structure does not mean everyone is going to work well together.
- Q: Have you found that having an Office of Early Education helps to bring additional resources to the field in your state to offset the cost that it takes to create and maintain a new department?
A: In Massachusetts, the department was underfunded from an administrative point of view. They did not lose any money in the consolidation, but you have to consider what it is going to take to run a high quality department.
- You can contact Nora Crowley at ncrowley@rilegislature.gov.
- You can contact Blythe Keeler Robinson at brobinson@shelteringarmsforkids.com.
- You can contact Amy O'Leary at aoleary@strategiesforchildren.org.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND PUBLIC COMMENT

- COMMENT: We have to consider what went well in other places and what things they wished they would have done differently so we can learn from others.
- COMMENT: This is such an exciting time right now, seeing the Commissioner testifying about the importance of early education and how it connects to the early elementary system. The recognition of the importance of early education is hopeful to me.
- COMMENT: This is our time. We need to be out there talking about this and we must make this happen.
- COMMENT: COVID has uncovered the challenges in this field and now it is our time to seize the day.