

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, September 29, 2020 9:00 a.m.-11:00 p.m.

Department of Administration

Meeting Summary

AGENDA SUMMARY

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

- Welcome, Opening Remarks, and Meeting Overview
- Update: Early Intervention System
- Presentation/Discussion: Revisions to the RI Early Learning Standards
- Presentation/Discussion: Early Educator Workforce
- Announcements and Public comment

KEY POINTS

Key discussion points from the meeting are summarized below:

WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS, AND MEETING OVERVIEW

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

- The whole workforce is under incredible stress during the pandemic in terms of support and the retention and attraction of new talent in the workforce.
- Schools are holding vaccine clinics. There is a lot of hesitation about being vaccinated due to misinformation, which the clinics are trying to dispel. One of the largest vaccine clinics in Providence was held last Sunday where 100 people were vaccinated. Information on future clinics is at www.back2schoolri.com.
- The state Pre-K program has expanded to 18 communities with 2300 seats.

UPDATE: EARLY INTERVENTION SYSTEM

Jennifer Kaufman and Casey Ferrara updated the Council on the Early Intervention System. (See slides.) The following comments and questions were made:

- Referral rates are recovering and are now 90% of pre-COVID referral rates.
- Even though referrals are up, staffing is down 21% statewide, which impacts the services providers can offer. To be fully staffed, EI would need 60 additional staff members. Typically, each staff member has a caseload of 30 to 50 children. These additional 60 staff members are just enough to meet current needs, however. EI will need more staff members once referral rates are at 100%.
- Four EI programs had to close to new referrals because they are at maximum capacity. However, within a couple of weeks, we hope to open some of the closed programs to new referrals.
- We cannot attract and retain staff because Medicaid rates do not support competitive wages for the system. Candidates are taking jobs elsewhere that offer \$10,000 to \$20,000 more. Please advocate for emergency ARPA funding to stabilize the Early Intervention system and a Medicaid rate increase in the FY23 budget.

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- The state's next Part C Award must dedicate 10% to equity projects and activities, specifically to engage and retain underserved populations. EOHHS is analyzing the data to determine how to maximize the impact of that 10% to ensure all children in Rhode Island that need EI services have access to those services and stay engaged until they age out or reach their goals.
- Child outcomes actually improved in 2020 during the months pre-COVID, but they were much lower in the post-COVID period of 2020. EOHHS hypothesizes that the reason for that decrease was because COVID put some services on hold or families chose not to engage in telehealth visits. All families that did not participate during 2020 due to COVID were re-engaged, but there have been many missed opportunities for families to teach skills during the day due to the demands and stresses of the pandemic. The constraints of telehealth visits might also have adversely affected assessment methods.
- Children receiving Medicaid are harder to engage initially and are more likely to disengage before meeting goals. Retaining and engaging Medicaid enrolled children will be one focus of the EOHHS equity work.
- There is much disparity between Medicaid enrolled and privately insured children.
- Hispanic children have similar results to Medicaid enrolled children although EOHHS has not looked at the overlap yet. Hispanic children are not enrolling in EI as early, they are not as engaged at the beginning, they are not making as much progress once engaged, and they are more like to disengage before meeting goals. EOHHS is thinking about activities and strategies to improve outcomes for these children.
- Despite the crisis in money and staffing, all nine EI programs are dedicated to making sure all children that need EI services are receiving those services.
- Q: Are you surveying Latino families that are dropping out or not finishing in order to determine why they leave?
A: That is a challenge because once they leave, we have no way to contact them. We would like to survey groups of families to see why they are not engaging. Our hypothesis is that our workforce does not reflect the people that they are serving, which discourages families from staying engaged. As part of the equity project, we will focus on finding providers that more closely match the demographics of the families EI serves.
- Q: How successful is EI with transitioning 3 year olds to the public school system?
A: EI helps transition children to the public school system, but sometimes children do not meet the different eligibility criteria of the school districts. EI works with those families that do not qualify for district services to help them find other community resources to support child development, e.g., other home visiting services or early learning centers.
- Q: Could public schools receive a list of children eligible for EI services who have not engaged?

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A: Providing the names of children without parent permission would violate EI's confidentiality rules. We hope that children are getting screened at 3, 4, and 5 years old so they can be engaged by the public school district if they need services after EI.

- COMMENT: RI KIDS COUNT received a grant to work on advocacy with parents related to EI and preschool special education, so it is partnering with PLEE and other stakeholders to understand challenges in accessing high-quality early childhood IDEA services and to develop a consensus advocacy agenda. To inform that policy agenda, KIDS COUNT will work with PLEE to engage EI providers, school districts, and other advocates especially in core cities. KIDS COUNT will provide more information on the advocacy work at the December Early Learning Council meeting.
- COMMENT: During COVID, families' main concern with EI was a dissatisfaction with the switch to telehealth. Families do not understand the coaching model and prefer to receive in person services. Many families dropped out of EI so they could receive in person services elsewhere. In the future, school departments and pediatricians will need additional resources for extra services and evaluations to make up for the family disengagement from EI.
- Q: Is there training about transition when families initially join EI? Within certain culture groups, families might be concerned about children being labeled so they might disengage before the transition happens. Spanish media could help persuade families to stay engaged.
A: RIPIN offers trainings in English and Spanish that are available to all of our EI families. In addition, EI staff is well versed in supporting families through the transition process. However, we recognize that there is more that EOHHS can do to help underserved populations. EOHHS would love to join forces to ensure all children are getting what they need.
- COMMENT: The staffing crisis is so serious that it has become a safety issue as well as an educational issue. What can we do as a Council to use COVID funds immediately to address the staffing crisis in EI and other early education programs?
- COMMENT: Staff is experiencing burnout because so many children are coming into programming with social and emotional problems and developmental delays.
- If anyone has further questions or ideas about the EI system, please email Jennifer.kaufman@ohhs.ri.gov

PRESENTATION/DISCUSSION: REVISIONS TO THE RI EARLY LEARNING STANDARDS

Amanda Blazka presented on the revisions to RIELDS and led the discussion to gather feedback on the RIELDS revision project. (See slides). Comments and questions included:

- We are revising RIELDS now because the last revision was 10 years ago and we want them to reflect the latest research and the current needs of children and families.
- Collecting feedback from the Council is just one step in the revision project. We will also solicit teacher feedback.

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- Council feedback was collected for each domain and is summarized below:
 - Overall RIELDS feedback
 - RIELDS is very long, detailed, and academic. Could we combine domains like social studies, math, and science together?
 - RIELDS should show multiple examples of behaviors and discuss building observation and assessment skills.
 - The family engagement pieces should be made more family friendly again.
 - Where does technology fit within RIELDS, e.g., more children using tablets during COVID?
 - Within the crosswalk, the RIELDS and CCSS should be more blended and integrated with a focus on CCSS practices.
 - How can we further embed relationship building with adults and student directed interests of learning into the standards?
 - The “Intended Use” (pg. 3) section of RIELDS should be on its own page for easier access and understanding for families.
 - The child growth trajectory graphic (pg. 9) should be a circular visual as opposed to a linear graphic to demonstrate the whole child approach.
 - Are the standards available in the seven major languages?
 - There is a lot of information on each page of the standards. How can we redesign this to highlight the most important pieces, especially for families or those not familiar with the standards?
 - RIELDS needs to start younger than 9 months old. Babies can enter the early education system as young as 6 weeks so RIELDS should start at 2 months.
 - For the youngest children, the domains should include just general development skills since social emotional, language and cognition are so intertwined at the early ages.
 - RIELDS would benefit from a review of the entire document with a racial equity lens to ensure there is sufficient attention to non-dominant bodies of knowledge. For example, it would be helpful to make sure that indicators and goals are meaningful and relevant.
 - The family fun activity cards offer many great activities. Is there any data on the use of them or other feedback from families? I wonder how accessible they are to parents with limited literacy.
 - It is also important to include a trauma informed lens to understand early behavior and development.
 - Physical Health and Motor Development
 - No comments
 - Social and Emotional Development
 - The basis of the standards is great! We should possibly add sense of self in the context of group/community.
 - Self-regulation should include the ability to articulate/label feelings (48 – 60 months).

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- Self-regulation should include possible complementary content on routines in the context of COVID.
- We should possibly add something around emotional regulation including anxiety/anger/fear.
- This domain should include ways to acknowledge use learnings from COVID.
- Language Development
 - This domain needs to make clear that children can meet learning goals in the child's home language.
- Literacy Development
 - Notice that there is phonological awareness – would we want to include phonemic awareness too?
 - We should add more family engagement activities in the area of literacy development.
 - The examples are helpful for people not as familiar with the intent/impact of the standards.
- Cognitive Development
 - These are essential and well written.
- Mathematics
 - No comments
- Science
 - Within component #2, the objectives at 9 months lack clarity and feel light. Could we add some element of physical touch?
- Social Studies
 - These are still very broad. Could we break them down? In addition, we should include citizenship, e.g., voting and group participation.
 - We should add a new appreciation of gender fluidity and be more explicit about race equity in a developmentally appropriate way.
 - There is a distinct opportunity here to ensure that these metrics are contextually appropriate to a diverse range of students.
 - Is this domain universally/culturally relevant for all kids?
 - We should include intentionally teaching cultural competence.
 - Can social studies and social-emotional development combine into one standard?
- Creative Arts
 - This domain should expand because there is so much creativity.
 - Currently, this domain is very broad. We should make it more specific with additional competencies like, music, dance, and visual arts.
 - Are there ways to embed these ideas throughout the standards to encourage additional student-directed learning opportunities?
- COMMENT: The AAP has many recommendations for pediatricians to promote health and development. These include a focus on early literacy promotion and fostering safe and nurturing early parent child relationships. These recommendations could inform the RIELDS revisions.
- Q: Are these standards shared with foster parents?

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A: These standards can be shared with anybody. There were efforts in the past to distribute the standards within the foster family system and they are used as a reference for supervisors and in trainings. Once the standards are revised, there will be collateral pieces that will include resources for parents, such as a calendar and family fun activities. These pieces can be distributed to the entire early education field. In addition, there are resources currently available at RIDE if anyone needs materials to distribute.

- COMMENT: Is there any thought about making text4baby type texts, which are free and available in multiple languages, accessible to new parents more universally? Maybe this is outside the ELS framework, but it does address promoting health and development in the first year of life with evidence informed strategies.
- Send additional feedback to Amanda.blazka@ride.ri.gov

PRESENTATION/DISCUSSION: EARLY EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

Leanne Barrett, Lisa Hildebrand, Christine Grele, Lori Wagner, Khadija Lewis Khan, Minerva Waldron, Emma Villa, Donna Chartier and Mary Varr presented on the early educator workforce. (See slides). Key comments and questions included the following:

Council Goals and Progress to Date

- In the Early Learning Council 2016- 2020 Comprehensive Advisory Plan, the Council identified top priorities and goals related to the early education workforce. We have made progress on several of those priorities and goals, both some goals need more attention:
 - Pre-K providers participate in the Workforce Registry, but other parts of the early education system need to participate more so we understand the whole workforce.
 - The Center for Early Learning Professionals and the Family Child Care Union Education & Support Fund are offering high quality professional development.
 - The state needs to move beyond exploring how to increase compensation to actually increasing compensation.
 - If we believe the research consensus that educators of young children birth through age 8 need the same body of skills and knowledge, then the state needs to increase the number of 1st and 2nd grade teachers that have Pre-K to 2 certification and not focus only on the educators of 3 to 5 year olds.
 - Afterschool educators need a career ladder and adequate compensation, but they were not included in the Race to the Top work, which focused on early care and education..

NAEYC Power to the Profession – Advancing Qualifications & Compensation

- Over the last few years, in order to professionalize the early education workforce, NAEYC engaged a large number of national organizations, agencies, and individuals in the Power to the Profession work to align standards and compensation. See this website for more information:
<http://powertotheprofession.org>

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- The collaborative process included a taskforce, events, national conferences, surveys, focus groups, visits to intentionally engaged individuals and affiliates, and in depth conversations with professionals from other industries.
- To professionalize the field, we need national standards on licensures and workforce competencies. Power to the Profession proposes a three-level pathway to be adopted nationwide (CDA/other entry-level credential, Associate degree, and Bachelor's/Master's degree)
- Compensation for early education professionals should be comparable across all positions requiring similar qualifications, experience, and responsibilities, regardless of the industry or age group served.
- Public school salaries should be a minimum benchmark.
- The effort so far serves as a framework for conversations going forward, but we still need advocacy to proceed.
- Q: In the proposed degree requirements, are there alternative methods for achieving a degree?
A: Higher education needs to be part of the conversation to determine how to achieve the degrees they award, but it is important for the system to remain flexible for those already in the workforce.

Early Child Care Career Pathways Project: An interagency project housed at the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner

- The goal of this project is to understand, communicate, and identify comprehensive, accessible, and equitable pathways that serve the needs of the entire early education workforce and field, regardless of the funding source.

The project will ensure multiple on-ramps to clear pathways that articulate and foster progress for all early child care workers and will provide wraparound supports and incentives to early child care educators enrolled in pathways and employers.

- The project is currently working on starting a comprehensive mapping of current career pathways and building an advisory committee. The project plans to implement programming in higher education within the next year.
- The project's timeline is ambitious, but the committee is approaching the urgency of the work with flexibility.
- The committee will engage key stakeholders to provide input on needs in higher education, to help understand the mapping work and its challenges, and to provide feedback on development as the project progresses.

Reports from the Early Childhood Field on Staffing Crisis

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- Early educators have become health care professionals. Not only do they have to monitor children for symptoms, they also lose compensation when they have to quarantine due to COVID symptoms or exposure. COVID requirements have made staffing issues more difficult, resulting in classroom closures, which forces directors and leads to work overtime.
- People will not fill open positions because wages are too low and responsibilities are too high.
- Assistant teachers do not want to invest time and money into additional classwork and certification if they will receive higher wages without any extra effort when the minimum wage increases. Higher degrees must result in higher compensation as an incentive.
- Early education programs cannot offer the same benefits as the public school system, which affects the ability of child care programs to attract and retain workers.
- Many early child care providers must work at multiple jobs to make ends meet.
- The responsibilities of early child care providers are too high for the salaries they receive.
- Increasing eligibility for child care subsidies would allow more people to fill under staffed positions in other industries (e.g., hospitality and nursing) while also providing increased revenue for child care providers. Currently, families are not taking on extra work because they do not want to lose their child care subsidies. Also, if enough families lose eligibility, then child care programs will have to close and those child care workers will not get compensated.
- Family child care homes are especially affected by the shortage in early child care workers because they cannot offer competitive benefits like health insurance. When family child care homes have reduced attendance due to COVID or limited staff, owners have less income and long term staff cannot receive raises.
- At Head Start in Woonsocket, there were 117 open staff positions this summer. Over the last 3.5 weeks, 25 staff members were out due to COVID. There were two classroom closures and five staff members left. Currently, there are two classrooms closed due to staffing. Last year at this time, there was 82% attendance for children. Now, it is 67% because children are sent home if they have any symptoms. Why is the government not supporting the programs that take care of the youngest children?
- Right from the Start released a sign-on letter encouraging the General Assembly and the governor to come together immediately to allocate money before Thanksgiving to increase wages to at least \$15/hour and to supplement salaries to keep qualified teachers in the field. The letter also requests expanded eligibility for child care subsidies so people can work extra hours without losing eligibility. Additionally, the letter requests a \$20/week increase in infant rates to offset the planned rate cut to CCAP that will take place in January, which will have a devastating effect on infant toddler programs.

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- COMMENT: We should all partner and coordinate to fight for increased wages since it is urgently needed by all in the early education sector.
- COMMENT: We should include birth to age 5 in the push to keep education programs from Kindergarten through 12th grade open. The campaign should include everyone.
- If child care programs have staffing vacancies, contact Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green because she hears from people who are looking for employment.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Comments from the public included:

- RSV infections are surging this year along with COVID, which will also cause parents to have to stay home.
- Early child care programs should emphasize COVID testing as much as the public school system.