

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, September 25, 2019 9:00 a.m.-11:00 p.m.

Save the Bay

Meeting Summary

AGENDA SUMMARY

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

- Welcome, Opening Remarks, and Meeting Overview
- PDG Birth to 5 Grant
- Infant/Toddler Educator Compensation Task Force
- Pre-K Expansion & Improving Transitions to Kindergarten
- Public Comment
- Upcoming Events and Meetings

KEY POINTS

Key discussion points from the meeting are summarized below:

WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS, AND MEETING OVERVIEW

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

- Director Hawkins reflected on some of the big wins for this year, including increased state funding for State Pre-K expansion and the rollback of the RI Works time limit for families.
- Director Hawkins thanked the PDG B-5 team for their substantial preparation efforts.
- Teams are working hard to ensure that the transition of licensing from DCYF to DHS is seamless for the childcare provider community. The goal is to be transparent about the process.
- Director Hawkins urged the Council to continue advocacy efforts opposing cuts to the public benefits system. If families cannot provide food, clothing and/or housing for their children, then we cannot successfully improve the early childhood education system.
- Commissioner Infante-Green explained that RIDE's budget will include money to sustain and build existing programs. All children, regardless of how much money they have, should be able to attend high quality Pre-K programs.
- Commissioner Infante-Green explained the importance of attendance for reaching the state's 3rd grade reading goals. To help increase attendance, 130 schools have signed up for RIDE's Attendance Leader Board, which tracks attendance for individual students. This Board will help parents see when their child is in danger of being chronically absent. RIDE is working with Harvard to establish a similar system for teachers. RIDE is also investigating ways of incentivizing attendance. A major attendance campaign will commence soon.
- Commissioner Infante-Green encouraged educators to offer more diverse reading materials for children. It is Latino and Spanish Heritage Month so schools should celebrate that by reading books that value different cultures.

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- Elizabeth Burke Bryant explained that the \$8.6 million appropriated by the state for the State Pre-K expansion was a major win. Our high quality mixed delivery Pre-K system needed state money to sustain and build seats after federal money ended. The state funds allowed 240 new children to attend State Pre-K programs this year.

PDG BIRTH TO 5 GRANT

Caitlin Molina, Sam Saltz, Cindy Larsen, Amy Checkoway and Barbara Goodson updated the Council on the PDG Birth to 5 grant, including preliminary results from the facility, family and workforce needs assessments. (See slides.) The following comments and questions were made:

- There will be a Council Work Group meeting on the PDG grant on Tuesday, November 12th from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m. at Save the Bay. That meeting will provide time to develop goals and to establish action steps in response to the needs assessments.
- If there are additional comments or questions related to PDG after this meeting, please email Sam at Sam.Saltz@dhs.ri.gov.
- DHS asked the Council to consider three key questions with respect to the needs assessments:
 - Are these findings consistent with your own experience? Are they reflective of the needs you experience within your own organization or community?
 - How would prioritize addressing these findings? Are there common themes that denote particular urgency?
 - Are the initiatives that your agency has piloted that would effectively address these needs at scale?
- Instead of just asking for additional funding to support its response to the needs assessments, DHS will focus primarily on redesigning and improving the coordination of existing investments. The state can leverage current state and federal funding streams to respond to the needs assessments findings, although a funding request might be made for a portion of the work.
- The current PDG B-5 grant funds cannot be used for adding seats. Those funds were intended for one year of planning for system building.
- The state wants to build a system that reflects the actual needs and priorities of families, which the needs assessments helped identify.
- The facilities needs assessment looked at information in several ways, including through surveys, data reviews, site visits, focus groups, interviews and project examples.
- The facilities needs assessment looked at six different program types, but focused on community based settings because that is where the majority of children attend.
- Rhode Island has enough physical space for our 4-year-old population, but that space is not necessarily high quality or in a child's community of residence.

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- The state does not currently have enough licensed infant toddler spaces of any quality level.
- The state has 18 communities that do not have any highly rated infant toddler spaces.
- As we expand the State Pre-K program, we need to be careful that we do not decrease the number of available infant toddler spaces.
- Most building spaces in Rhode Island can be converted to infant toddler spaces for minimal cost. Those conversions are not financially practical, however, because of the ratios and reimbursements required for infant toddler care. For example, a four star CCAP program would incur a \$50K revenue loss for converting its program.
- The challenges in space have not changed much in the last 5 years, but programs are fuller, with 77% of programs having a waitlist and 64% of programs fully enrolled.
- Most program openings are in the 3-5 age group.
- Out of 90 centers that said they had openings, only 8 programs (216 slots) were high quality with the space and resources to operate an additional classroom.
- Regulations as written are not posing a barrier to growth, but differing interpretations of those regulations are confusing and difficult to navigate.
- Typically, early learning providers can use only 12% of total revenue for occupancy needs.
- Leaders in the field prioritize improving the facilities we already have, but real estate professionals think we should support developers in creating new spaces. Both are valid strategies and highlight the importance of bringing together people from diverse backgrounds to design solutions.
- Currently, providers do not feel like they have the organizational stability to take on big projects.
- Both Massachusetts and Connecticut have successful bond programs to fund facility needs. Rhode Island should think about using bonds to fund early learning facility improvements.
- When thinking about expanding the State Pre-K program, it is hard to plan for space when notification comes out in July for a September start date. That is not enough time to make any significant facility adjustments.
- Every state that has successfully addressed facility needs has had a variety of community partners at the table, including business owners, big philanthropists, and real estate professionals. If we want to address Rhode Island's facility needs successfully, we should do the same.

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- Over 700 families responded to the family needs assessment. Three-quarters of those families represented one or more vulnerable populations, such as families with foster children, families with children with special needs, families where the primary language is not English, and low-income families.
- Most families had positive feelings about available services, but a number of vulnerable families faced significant barriers to receiving those services.
- All families wanted affordable, easily accessible, high quality childcare that prepares children for Kindergarten. However, they were overwhelmed with the array of services available and were unable to navigate the options.
- Families wanted more information about services, but they did not know how to get that information. Family and friends were the primary sources of information for these families, but, for the most part, those people were not able to provide additional facts about the early learning system. The internet is not a primary source of information for these families, so they were not aware of ECEDS.
- To be more effective, the state needs to restructure its communications to these families. Families would benefit from a family navigator that personally helps families learn about available services, much like the BrightStars navigators help programs with quality improvement. Families need to be able to go to someone they trust for information.
- Commissioner Infante-Green pointed out that, for families of poverty or from different cultures, the internet is the least effective way to distribute information. To communicate with these families, we need to go where they go, such as to faith based organizations and the supermarket. Visiting community organizations carries the same stigma as receiving public assistance so families will not seek out information in that way.
- Director Hawkins pointed out that PDG prioritizes the expansion of work through health equity zones and the Department of Health because that is where the people are.
- The state has contracted with RIPIN to communicate the family needs assessment findings back to the community. If any Council members are aware of other potential ways to socialize the findings from the family needs assessment, let Caitlin know.
- COMMENT: As we start to make plans in response to the family needs assessment, we should go back to the families to ensure we are responding appropriately.
- The early childhood education workforce is part of a fragile system. There are serious compensation concerns, extensive turnover, and excessive stress and burnout.

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- Although there is a good foundation of higher education supports and professional development opportunities, providers working full-time have difficulty accessing those resources and, therefore, cannot improve their credentials despite having the desire to do so.
- We need to ensure that expanded State Pre-K classrooms are staffed without impacting other classrooms. If we move teachers from existing classrooms to new State Pre-K classrooms, we could compromise quality. We need to support improving credentials to fill those vacancies.
- Q: Why are two-thirds of the 3000 teachers with a Pre-K – 2 credential not using their certificate in Rhode Island?
A: Most of those people are teaching in classrooms that do not require certification. They also may have dual certification. The workforce registry could help identify why they are not using their certification.
- AnLar, the vendor who is developing the Prenatal-5 System Action Plan as a deliverable for the PDG B-5 planning grant, will provide additional opportunities for feedback.
- Commissioner Infante-Green emphasized that this is the time for big ideas because the governor is committed to looking at various approaches for this work. We need to be creative and work differently with new partners.

INFANT/TODDLER EDUCATOR COMPENSATION TASK FORCE

Rachel Flum reviewed the task force recommendations and requested endorsement by the Council. (See slides). Comments and questions included the following:

- The report from the Infant/Toddler Educator Compensation Task Force looks at the early learning sector across the board, including Early Intervention, family home visiting, and childcare.
- Wages in Rhode Island are not where they need to be. The early learning workforce is struggling to meet its own basic needs while caring for children that are also struggling.
- Without sufficient compensation, we cannot improve quality because qualified and effective infant/toddler educators often seek job opportunities with older children that have higher wages.
- The Task Force created an Infant/Toddler Professional Target Wage Scale, setting goals for wages by education level. The Task Force recommends that the state design and implement strategies to increase wages to these levels.
- There are 3 strategies for improving wages outlined in the report:
 - Contract directly with programs and specify minimum wages, like the state does with its State Pre-K program, which requires that Pre-K teachers are paid wages at or above the starting salary for kindergarten teachers
 - Find an intermediary organization to pay wage supplements to providers, like the T.E.A.C.H. model

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- Twenty states use the T.E.A.C.H. model and 15 states implement a wage strategy that pays teachers directly, but few teachers in any of these states are actually receiving the supplement.
- Utilize a refundable tax credit for teachers
- The Task Force's report makes cross-sector recommendations in three areas, which should be addressed simultaneously. The three recommendation areas are family home visiting, Early Intervention and infant/toddler childcare:
 - Family home visiting recommendation
 - The report recommends that the state incorporate the Infant/Toddler Professional Target Wage Scale into family home visiting contracts
 - Early Intervention recommendations
 - These recommendations focus on using existing billing opportunities to modify and improve the work of EI, establishing a compensation incentive pool, and increasing rates paid to Early Intervention providers
 - Infant/toddler childcare recommendations
 - These recommendations include a commitment to meeting the federal guidelines for reimbursement rates, i.e., base reimbursement rates at or above the 25th percentile of the market rate survey and highest star rating reimbursement rates at or above the 75th the percentile of the market rate survey
 - The report also recommends an infant/toddler wage supplement demonstration project for \$250K/year for two years
- The demonstration project would require that a participating educator recipient receive a base rate of at least \$12/hour. This ensures engagement by the employer as well.
- The goal of the demonstration project is to improve wages for providers and to help programs increase star ratings and retain staff.
- Through the demonstration project, the state would pay a wage supplement directly to providers to fill the gap in pay.
- Q: If the Council endorses these recommendations, are we also endorsing the demonstration project?
A: A Council endorsement would recommend that DHS consider the demonstration project strategy as well as the other recommendations in the task force report.
- COMMENT: When the Governor puts out her package of revenue proposals, each Council member should select a proposal to advocate for and support since additional revenue is needed to increase compensation levels for effective infant/toddler educators and address the workforce crisis providers are experiencing in attracting and retaining effective and qualified staff.
- COMMENT: There will be a webinar released soon that discusses different revenue streams funneling in the early childhood system.

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PRE-K EXPANSION & IMPROVING TRANSITIONS TO KINDERGARTEN

Lisa Nugent, Kate Maccio and Melissa Moniz discussed State Pre-K expansion and ways of improving transitions to Kindergarten. (See slides.) Comments and questions included:

- This year's State Pre-K expansion has added 340 new seats across 18 classrooms, including classrooms in public schools, community based organizations and Head Start programs.
- For the first time, there is an LEA-Head Start partnership. It is in Woonsocket.
- The itinerant model for delivering special education services is supported in both State Pre-K classrooms as well as in community-based organizations.
- The State Pre-K to Kindergarten transition work began with Cohort 1, a group consisting of three communities whose transition training was supported by PDG Expansion funds. Cohort 2 is starting shortly with three additional communities and will be funded by PDG Birth to 5 funds.
- Soon, RIDE will release a survey to all Kindergarten teachers statewide. That survey will ask what information Kindergarten teachers want at transition from the early education community and what information they are currently receiving. RIDE will present data from that survey at a future Early Learning Council meeting.
- Woonsocket has worked to create an example of how preschool programs and school districts can work together to create a seamless transition to Kindergarten.
 - They organized community events, created videos, and composed books to help ease the transition for children. They also offered Kindergarten registration at early childhood programs to ensure all paperwork was completed by the time Kindergarten began. Early childhood educators were in classrooms on the first day of school to provide a familiar face for new kindergartners.
 - Early childhood providers and Kindergarten teachers redesigned transition forms to reflect the needs and concerns of both groups of teachers.
 - Mental health and disability specialists from community programs spoke with social workers from school districts to address concerns about specific children. In this way, they ensured that those children entered Kindergarten with the necessary services in place.
 - There was a community partner event open to all childcare providers so that everyone could hear the expectations for children entering Kindergarten.
 - Woonsocket is creating a written system that includes all of the improvements to its Pre-K to Kindergarten transition process. This will allow the city to maintain and expand upon those enhancements going forward.
- Q: How many children are in the strictly self-contained classrooms in Woonsocket?
A: Before the transition work, Woonsocket had 88 students in four half-day strictly self-contained classrooms. There were typically around 26 IEPs per year. After the transition work, Woonsocket has worked to fully integrate those students into the regular classrooms. Because of that change

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in policy, this year there were 76 IEPs. Additionally, there are now two full day fully integrated Head Start classrooms with 18 students each.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Comments from the public included:

- The Federal Reserve Bank in Boston is coming to Rhode Island on October 25th from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. to present the results of its child care survey. Email Rachel Flum for registration information.

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

Upcoming events and meetings include a Special Council Work Group Meeting on PDG on Tuesday, November 12 from 9:00 – 11:00 a.m. at Save the Bay. The next Early Learning Council meeting is on Wednesday, December 11 from 9:00 – 11:00 a.m. at Save the Bay.