

Rhode Island Early Learning Council Meeting

Wednesday, September 30, 2020 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 Meeting Overview
- Strategic Plan and PDG Birth to 5 Grant
- Early Years/Early Grades Alignment Work Group
- Family Child Care Policy Priorities Update
- COVID-19 & Child Care
- 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 were made:

- Director Courtney Hawkins thanked for everyone for the hard work that helped Rhode Island exceed the results seen in other states in response to COVID-19. We are ensuring families' access to care and we are doing it safely.
- Elizabeth Burke Bryant commended all the providers working on the front lines. They are making sure that children and families have everything necessary to succeed. During COVID-19, that work goes beyond educating children and includes social work too.
- KIDS COUNT recognized Leslie Gell for her dedication to Ready to Learn Providence. Ready to Learn Providence is winding down after a long community based effort to help young children thrive.

STRATEGIC PLAN AND PDG BIRTH TO 5 GRANT

Kayla Rosen and Ashley O'Shea updated the Council on the Early Childhood Care and Education Strategic Plan and PDG Birth to 5 grant. (See slides.) The following comments and questions were made:

- In 2019, Rhode Island received a \$4 million grant for one year of capacity building activities. The state conducted four needs assessments with that funding. The data gathered in those assessments helped inform the Strategic Plan.
- In early 2020, Rhode Island adopted an Early Childhood Care and Education Strategic Plan that builds on the shared mission across state agencies and encourages collaboration among those agencies. It is available on the Children's Cabinet website:
www.kids.ri.gov/cabinet/documents/RI_PDG_ECCE_StrategicPln.pdf
- The state received a three year \$27 million PDG Renewal Grant starting in 2020 to help achieve the objectives of the Strategic Plan. The grant will fund 30 activities supporting the Strategic Plan.

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- One of the activities that supports the Strategic Plan is a public awareness campaign to encourage well visits by families concerned about COVID-19. Although many families have returned for vaccinations and well visits, some have not. The campaign will feature children from Rhode Island along with Rhode Island's Dr. McDonald. Filming will occur on October 13th and 14th and participating families will receive a significant gift card. Local families and pediatricians weighed in on the campaign.
- Q: Will the campaign encourage families to use other programs and supports that benefit children, such as family home visiting and preschool?
A: Pediatrician well visits are a first point of contact for many families so the campaign will focus on that. Once we engage the families through well visits, we will refer them to the www.kids.ri.gov website, which includes information on all services available for children. The well visit is the hook to connect with families.
- COMMENT: RIDE should inform pediatricians about available State Pre-K seats and their locations so they can identify children that could benefit from those openings.

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 included the following:

- The Education Commission of the States (ECS) provided technical assistance to the Early Years/Early Grades Alignment Work Group.
- The Work Group has developed draft recommendations around priority issues.
- The timing of continuing education classes is a barrier for providers to attain additional credits because classes often conflict with work hours. Language is also a barrier to obtaining more credits.
- Pre-service early childhood teachers should leave educator preparation programs with the skills and certification they need without having to go back to school to meet legislative requirements.
- Kindergarten and First Grade teachers need professional development on transitions and the RI Early Learning and Development Standards (RIELDS) so they have the same understanding as early childhood educators.
- Principals in public school settings where Pre-K is offered need a better understanding of what is developmentally appropriate for Pre-K students. This instruction could be included in the principal certification process.
- During the pandemic, early childhood programs and school systems have had to connect and work together, which has put us on a good path that needs to continue.

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- Data sharing between early child care programs and schools helps transitions so we should examine ways of improving data collection on young children.
- Although Kindergarten classrooms offer high quality curriculums, the focus is not always on developmentally appropriate practices. Kindergarten classrooms need guidance and technical assistance to ensure they are using developmentally appropriate practice to teach high quality curriculums.
- LEAs and early childhood education partners need joint professional development around RIELDS and State Pre-K standards so they each have a mutual understanding of their respective regulations.
- Formative assessments for K-2 could inform policy, but RIDE would not use them for school accountability.
- COMMENT: Creating a legislative study committee on data sharing is not a high priority.
- COMMENT: Joint professional development is important because teachers that are elementary certified, as opposed to early childhood certified, are not receiving an in depth knowledge of the Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards (RIELDS) and early childhood development.
- COMMENT: For the past 10 years we have talked about children being ready for school. Now we are talking about schools being ready for children. To accomplish that, schools need to understand the focus of early childhood, including the teaching methods and environments utilized by early child care educators.
- COMMENT: Recruitment incentives are always important, but they are especially so during COVID-19 because early child care programs are a close contact business. The workforce is the foundation of everything providers do. Offering creative pathways for improving education is tied to recruitment incentives because pathways encourage providers to move up, thereby increasing wages.
- COMMENT: Creating a more diverse workforce requires thinking about issues of race, equity, and bias and looking at systems that might be barriers.
- COMMENT: The Center for Early Learning Professionals is translating RIELDS into Spanish. The Center will offer RIELDS training in Spanish online as well as through the new English Language Learning for Emergent Multilingual Family Child Care Providers at the Genesis Center.

FAMILY CHILD CARE POLICY PRIORITIES UPDATE

Emma Villa and Donna Chartier updated the Council on family child care policy priorities. Key comments and questions included:

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- This work group's goal is to create a fact sheet with policy recommendations for family child care providers. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the work group will disseminate the fact sheet in English and Spanish to family child care providers, policymakers and other stakeholders.
- Family child care providers are more popular after COVID-19 because of smaller group sizes.
- Q: What is the breakdown of BrightStars ratings by language of provider? It is important to see if there are patterns or barriers around BrightStars ratings.
A: BrightStars can sort ratings by language and will provide that information.
- To recruit more early child care educators, we need to provide better education and supports.
- Providers need even more supports during a pandemic, especially financial supports.
- The reimbursement rate has increased temporarily under COVID-19, but many children have not returned to care because parents are unemployed so compensation has still decreased.
- Communication with DHS regarding CCAP needs to be more flexible and open so children do not lose benefits due to failure to renew.
- Providers need more technical support during COVID-19 so they can continue family outreach, connect with other providers, and apply for available grants.
- Providers need better health insurance, especially with the risk of contracting COVID-19.
- COMMENT: Providers are essential workers for opening the economy, but they are not receiving anything in return for being on the front lines.
- COMMENT: Many early child care providers do not have access to health insurance and/or do not have the income to support paying for even subsidized health insurance. Perhaps KIDS COUNT could ask Health Source RI to work with family child care providers and help them get access to subsidized health insurance.
- Catherine Green is the new Head Start Collaboration director. As part of the PDG renewal process, the state has allocated additional funding over the next 3 years to expand the state's investment in the Early Head Start/Child Care partnership model. Initially, this expansion will not follow the same requirements of Head Start in order to ensure more flexibility with funding and more opportunity to engage child care providers. Children's Friend holds the contract for the partnership expansion and would love to work with family child care providers during this expansion. If you are a provider that is interested in this opportunity, please email Catherine at Catherine.green@dhs.ri.gov.

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- Q: As the state thinks about supporting and stabilizing small business outreach in the wake of COVID-19, are there additional ways of supporting the needs of early childhood educators through CARES act funding or other sources?
A: The state is looking into additional sources of funding support for providers impacted by COVID-19 and state closures.
- Q: The government has put many resources toward testing K-12 students and educators. Will that be expanded to children in child care and early childhood educators?
A: Testing for K-12 is a new initiative, but testing for child care providers and children has been in place since June 1st when child care reopened. The goal is to combine the two systems to offer better scaled services. Surveillance testing for high contact workers, including child care providers, is available as well. There are also mobilized testing events in high density communities that experience multiple positive tests. Private and public schools have equal access to K-12 testing. Although testing turnaround times are improving, testing does not provide clearance for returning to work if someone is formally quarantined or is exhibiting symptoms.

COVID-19 & CHILD CARE

Caitlin Molina and Erin Cox discussed the effect of COVID-19 on child care. (See slides.) The following comments were made:

- Rhode Island was one of the first states to put pandemic responses into CCAP payment practices.
- DHS submitted plan amendments and federal waivers for co-pay requirements within a week of closures. The state also covered the cost of the waived co-pay amounts for three months.
- The state also waived the allowable absence policy since children needed to be symptom free to return to child care.
- The state navigated a federal policy adjustment to reinstate families that lost CCAP benefits due to the unemployment boost. This affected less than 100 families.
- RIAEYC and the Center for Early Learning Professionals offered dedicated professional development and technical assistance to help all providers develop COVID-19 reopening plans.
- The DHS licensing unit worked individually with each provider to develop and implement reopening plans.
- The temporary CCAP rate enhancement continues through December, but will need federal funding to continue into next year. Because statutes set rates, the governor needed to use an Executive Order to approve the rate enhancement during the public health emergency.
- Private pay providers are struggling with reopening costs, especially fixed costs like occupancy and small capital improvement projects. DHS will prioritize CARES Act funding for these providers.

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- Many programs that have not reopened serve families that have no need or desire to return to child care.
- New child care owners have purchased more than 50% of the permanently closed center based programs and have plans to reopen them.
- DHS is still seeing new applications for child care programs, including 9 new sites slated to open in the next few months.
- DHS has enabled licensed child care providers to obtain temporary variances for school age care in districts that are not offering full in-person instruction. There have been more than 50 applications to expand capacity. Programs are responding to a need and are bridging a gap in learning.
- DHS has a dedicated child care huddle that meets twice daily to discuss all COVID-19 incidents in child care. The CDC said Rhode Island has a low incidence of COVID-19 cases and secondary transmission in early childhood education settings because providers are closely adhering to the COVID-19 regulations.
- Next year, DHS will release a Market Rate Survey to evaluate the health of the child care industry and rate structure in Rhode Island. In anticipation of that Market Rate Survey, DHS is working with a vendor, Public Consulting Group, to conduct three monthly surveys (sprints) on the following metrics:
 - Child enrollment and attendance
 - Staffing, including return, retention and compensation
 - Procurement of PPE, materials and equipment
- Soon, DHS will send out emails to early child care providers requesting data for these sprints.
- RIAEYC created a website to help providers procure PPE: www.riaeyc.org/ppe-resources
- DHS's unannounced enforcement visits have found few COVID-19 related violations. Most COVID-19 related violations involved the location of cleaning substances.
- RIAEYC is joining DHS licensors on monitoring visits to offer assistance with professional development and other opportunities for improving child care programs.
- The LISC Child Care Provider Relief Fund is offering \$5 million in emergency relief grants for child care infrastructure improvements.
- Projects must be an appropriate and allowed use of the grant, align with the COVID-19 emergency, and not duplicate other sources of funding.

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- LISC recommended funding for every initially eligible group that applied for occupancy cost reimbursement.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND PUBLIC COMMENT

Comments from the public included the following:

- The Washington County Coalition for Children received PDG funding for professional development. The Coalition used that funding to create training on ACEs and strategies for resilience building among early childhood professionals. The Coalition will offer that training via ZOOM in October and November.
 - The Coalition also partnered with URI to develop www.greatest8.org, which addresses the importance of the eight core skills for a life time of mental wellness starting at birth through age 8. The partnership is also in the process of rolling out a text messaging services for parents.