



Candidate Guide: State Policy and Budget Priorities to Ensure All RI Kids & Families Can Thrive

[Right from the Start](#) is a legislative and budget campaign led by eight organizations to advance state policies that help ensure all babies and young children get off to the right start in life, regardless of family income, race, ethnicity, immigration status, or zip code. **Below we outline our state policy and budget priorities in the hope that you will consider these recommendations as you run for office and talk with voters in your community.**

Raise Revenue to Help Families Pay for Reliable, Quality Child Care

Nine out of 10 families in Rhode Island cannot afford quality child care. **Rhode Island has cut \$46 million in state general revenue from child care since 2005 and is helping half the number of families we helped in 2003 pay for child care.**

- **Enact the [Revenue for Rhode Islanders](#) millionaire fair tax strategy** which would increase the marginal tax on Rhode Islanders who earn \$1 million or more per year and would bring in at least \$50 million in new state revenue to invest in child care and early learning programs so we can help more families access quality care and early learning programs.
- **Other equitable strategies should also be considered to [generate more revenue for child care](#)**, including potentially increasing property taxes on second homes and/or extremely high-value homes, a large percentage of which are owned by high income and high wealth individuals.

Sustain and Strengthen High-Quality Public Preschool Options while Responding to the Infant and Toddler Child Care Crisis

As RI Pre-K has expanded, access to very high-quality Head Start and Early Head Start programs has declined. High-quality infant and toddler child care has become increasingly difficult to find and is completely unaffordable for most families. State investments have not been adequate to offer competitive wages in most early learning programs statewide.

- **Increase the \$4.2 million state investment in the Head Start and Early Head Start model (\$3 million of which is actually federal TANF funding)** as part of the state's plan to achieve universal access to preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds and provide high-quality infant and toddler care. Close the \$35,000 wage gap for Head Start teachers.
- Continue the \$29.9 million in state General Revenue investment in RI Pre-K. **Invest in existing classrooms by closing the substantial (\$30,000+) wage gap for both RI Pre-K and Head Start teachers** and their supervisors in community-based programs before expanding. The only way we have been able to finance RI Pre-K expansion is by paying non-competitive wages to RI Pre-K teachers and administrators and blending funding with federal Head Start dollars (20% of all children enrolled in RI Pre-K are also enrolled in Head Start).

- Any new dollar in funding for RI Pre-K and Head Start (3- and 4-year-olds) should be **matched with at least 30 cents in new funding to shore up programs for infants and toddlers under age 3.**

Stabilize and Expand Access to Affordable, Quality Child Care

Improving access to affordable, high-quality child care is an **essential part of the state’s goals to strengthen the economy, raise the income of residents, and improve education outcomes for children.** Parents need child care so they can work, complete job training, earn credentials and degrees, and move up the wage ladder while children are in a safe, high-quality learning environment. The child care staffing crisis is limiting access to affordable, quality child care for families at all income levels.

Expand and Strengthen the RI Child Care Assistance Program

- **Remove the burdensome and unusual child support enforcement requirement.** Trust moms to make their own decision about the value of pursuing child support rather than forcing women to establish paternity and attend court appointments to access a child care subsidy.
- Join Vermont, Maine, and 10 other states that **meet or exceed the federal standard for family income (85% of State Median Income) to help almost half of families in the state pay for child care.**
- **Update and increase provider rates for all ages of children in the RI Child Care Assistance Program** to meet or exceed federal equal access standards using the new data from the 2024 Rhode Island Child Care Market Rate Survey.

Solve the Early Educator Staffing Crisis Statewide

- **Make the [Child Care for Child Care Educators](#) program permanent and remove the household income limit** by providing categorical eligibility to the Child Care Assistance Program for child care educators regardless of family income and with no copayments, like Kentucky does.
- **Invest at least \$2 million to continue [the Child Care WAGES pilot program in Rhode Island](#) providing annual wage supplements to low-wage child care educators statewide, ranging from \$3,000/year to \$12,000/year based on qualifications.**

Ensure Young Children Have Access to Pediatric Care

Rhode Island families with babies and young children are experiencing great difficulty accessing pediatric primary health care. In addition to the post-pandemic Medicaid unwinding, which has resulted in more than 11,500 children losing access to Medicaid, [families across the state are reporting they cannot find a pediatric primary care provider.](#)

- **Adopt continuous Medicaid coverage by starting with infants and toddlers under age 3.** At least 12 states have taken action to provide continuous coverage for babies and young children with Medicaid insurance, so they have consistent access to preventive, specialized, and emergency health care.

- **Address the Pediatric Primary Care Shortage by providing an immediate Medicaid rate increase and by conducting a comprehensive Medicaid rate review.** Expanding access to pediatric primary health care will reduce costs associated with the use of hospital Emergency Rooms for routine medical care.

Fix Both Early Childhood Special Education Systems

Since November 2021, Rhode Island has had a **waiting list for Early Intervention services for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities** required under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). **The preschool special education system managed by 35 school districts struggles** to identify and provide inclusive special education services to children ages 3 to 5 who have developmental delays and disabilities.

- **Implement new strategies to recruit and retain qualified Early Intervention staff by adding Early Intervention staff to the Child Care for Child Care Educators program** and removing the family income limit (in collaboration with DHS).
- **Create and fund a community-led task force to develop a comprehensive plan to ensure all children from birth to 5 receive high-quality Early Childhood IDEA services** (across both Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education).

Invest in Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Mental Health

Many mothers and young children experience significant mental health challenges that interfere with their relationships, well-being, and ability to function.

- Enact a permanent funding mechanism for the MomsPRN and PediPRN consultation programs to **help primary care providers manage their patients' mental health challenges.**
- **Develop and fund a Rhode Island Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Hub** to train and support professionals to use appropriate and culturally-responsive tools and therapies to better screen, evaluate, and treat mental health challenges of children under age 6.

Fund Family Home Visiting

[Family Home Visiting programs improve outcomes for young children and offer a strong return on investment](#) by promoting healthy child development and reducing the need for more costly interventions down the road. Since 2021, due to financing and staffing issues, the number of Rhode Island families served by a comprehensive, evidence-based family home visiting program has dropped by 24%.

- **Sustain and increase general revenue spending on evidence-based family home visiting** to meet or exceed the match requirement to maximize federal funding (\$242,000 in SFY 2025, \$356,000 in SFY2026, \$535,000 in SFY2027, and \$787,000 in SFY2028).
- **Develop a plan to sustain, adequately staff, and expand voluntary family home visiting services**, so that high-quality home visiting programs are offered to all families who could benefit.

Improve Paid Family Leave

Rhode Island was the third state in the nation to establish a paid family leave program, but since then we have fallen behind paid family leave programs offered by other states, including Connecticut and Massachusetts.

- **Increase the wage replacement level** so all parents, and especially lower wage-earning parents, can have adequate income to stay home and care for newborns, adoptive, and foster children. At 60% of wages, Rhode Island has the lowest wage replacement rate in the U.S.
- **Increase the length of paid family leave to reach the 12-week minimum benchmark.** Longer leaves are associated with improved health and more consistent nurturing relationships for parents and for babies.

Improve the Economic Security of Families with Young Children

Ample research indicates that **providing additional income to families with low resources yields significant, lasting benefits for young children's health, education, and future earnings**. Rising costs for housing, child care, and food are making it difficult for many families to make ends meet, particularly those with young children.

- Increase Rhode Island's refundable **Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)** for low and moderate wage working families from 15% to at least 30% of the federal credit. Both Massachusetts and Connecticut offer 40% of the federal credit.
- Support efforts at the federal level to expand the **Child Tax Credit** and make it fully refundable. Rhode Island should [create a state Child Tax Credit like 15 other states have done](#).
- Improve the **RI Works cash assistance program**, [an essential safety-net for families with babies and young children](#), by establishing a statutory cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to keep payments level with inflation.

Right from the Start Steering Committee

Beautiful Beginnings
Economic Progress Institute
Latino Policy Institute
Parents Leading for Educational Equity
Rhode Island Association for Infant Mental Health
Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children
Rhode Island Head Start Association
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT