



2026 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 and **two parents** 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.**

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

- **Restore state general revenue funding cut for CCAP to levels sufficient to ensure RI meets federal benchmarks for family eligibility and provider rates.** Rhode Island is one of only seven states in the U.S. (other states are: Arkansas, Idaho, Missouri, Nevada, West Virginia, and Wyoming) that are investing only the bare minimum needed to receive federal child care funding. **Rhode Island has cut \$46 million in state general revenue funding for child care assistance.**
- **Remove the burdensome and unusual child support enforcement requirement.** Only 8 states impose this regressive requirement that a parent must cooperate with the Office of Child Support in order to receive child care assistance. 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.** (In 2026, 85% of SMI for a family of 3 is \$85,356. Rhode Island's CCAP program income limit will be 285% of the federal poverty level in January 2027 which is \$77,762/family of 3.)

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

- Invest at least \$2 million to continue [the Child Care WAGES Program in Rhode Island](#) providing annual wage supplements to low-wage child care educators statewide, ranging from \$1,500/year to \$12,000/year based on qualifications.

Sustain and Strengthen Both Head Start and RI Pre-K as High-Quality Public Preschool Options

As RI Pre-K has expanded, access to very high-quality Head Start and Early Head Start programs has declined.

- Increase state General Revenue investment in RI Pre- and in Head Start to **close the substantial (\$30,000+) wage gap for both RI Pre-K and Head Start teachers (as compared to kindergarten teachers)** 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. (14% of all children enrolled in RI Pre-K are also enrolled in Head Start).

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](#).

- Address the Pediatric Primary Care Shortage by providing an immediate Medicaid rate increase and supporting the state's ongoing primary care rate review, which includes pediatric rates and is expected to be completed by the end of September. Following the release of the report, the state should adopt and fund any recommended rate increases to ensure adequate access to pediatric primary care. Expanding access to pediatric primary health care will reduce costs associated with the use of hospital Emergency Rooms for routine medical care.

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 32%. During this time 9 programs have closed, including the only Nurse Family Partnership program in the state.

- **Sustain and increase general revenue spending on evidence-based family home visiting** to meet or exceed the match requirement to maximize federal funding (\$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 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.
- **Expand the definition of who can take time to care for family members to include grandchildren.**
- Allow self-employed workers to buy into the program.

Right From the Start Steering committee

American Academy of Pediatrics, RI Chapter

Beautiful Beginnings

Economic Progress 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