September 2026

Top Early Childhood Priorities for the FY28 Governor's Budget Proposal

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 budget priorities in the hope that you will consider these recommendations as you develop your FY28 Budget proposals.

Early Care and Education

Child Care (DHS): Providers need more funding to meet new minimum wage requirements, offer competitive wages to retain qualified staff, and keep classrooms open. The median hourly wage for a child care teacher in Rhode Island is $17.56 and many do not have sufficient benefits. Increase provider rates for the RI Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to the federal equal access benchmark (75th percentile of the 2024 Rhode Island Child Care Market Rate Survey) using general revenue. Increasing rates for child care centers up to 75% percentile will cost approximately $8 million.

Remove the child support enforcement requirement for RI CCAP participation. Rhode Island is one of only eight states that currently impose this requirement for applicants to participate in state managed child support enforcement as an eligibility requirement to quality for the RI Child Care Assistance Program. Evidence suggests that child support enforcement in the child care subsidy process does not help families gain additional funds for financial security. Instead, this requirement creates a barrier to child care for working parents.

Ensure families can access affordable, quality child care by increasing the CCAP income eligibility limit to 85% of State Median Income, joining Vermont, Maine, and 10 other states who 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.)

Early Childhood Categorical Funding (RIDE):
As Head Start funding is threatened and parents struggle with the cost of quality early care and education, invest an additional $5 million to preserve and stabilize Head Start and RI Pre-K. Information from National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) shows that Rhode Island is underinvesting in our Pre-K program by almost $19 million. While we meet all the quality standards, our investment in the current seats is not keeping up with the cost of care and teachers' wages lag significantly behind those of our K-12 teachers.

We are concerned about TANF funding remaining available to fund Head Start, and recommend that the $3 million in TANF funding be replaced with state general revenue funding to keep the program whole and to allow Head Start agencies to use this funding as part of the required match needed to draw down federal Head Start funding. This will also help support the Rhode Island's Pre-K system, as Head Start seats count as Pre-K seats.

Early Care and Education Workforce (DHS):
To attract and retain highly qualified and caring early childhood educators, invest $2 million in the WAGE$ program, stabilizing early childhood education for the providers and also for the families that rely on early childhood education to go to work. This investment would maintain and continue an existing initiative rather than create a new program, since WAGE$ was previously grant funded. We know this works – the retention rate of recipients working in classrooms directly with children is 98%.

Health and Development

Family Home Visiting (DOH): Since 2021, the number of families enrolled in an evidence-based family home visiting program has dropped by 37%. Significant federal funding is available to help reduce this downward trend. Invest at least $787,000 to meet the state match needed to receive $3.2 million in additional federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) funds.

Pediatric Primary Care (EOHHS): Rhode Island families with babies and young children are experiencing great difficulty accessing pediatric primary health care. Address the pediatric primary care shortage by adopting and funding the OHIC rate review recommendation for primary rates, including pediatric rate increases.

Family Economic Security

Improve Paid Family Leave (DLT): 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. And ensure grandparents can care for seriously ill grandchildren.

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