

Testimony in Support of S-2235
Senate Education Committee
March 30, 2022

The Economic Progress Institute, a steering committee member of the Right from the Start Campaign, strongly supports Senator Cano's bill S-2235, the "Rhode Island Early Educator Investment Act", which directs the RI Children's Cabinet to establish a target wage scale for early educators and to identify strategies for increasing compensation in child care, Early Intervention, RI Pre-K and family home visiting. The bill also creates an early educator registry and invests \$5 million to pilot a child care educator wage supplement. We support this bill because it is the right thing to do to pay educators a fair wage, but also because current inadequate wages are resulting in women leaving the workforce, which harms our state's economy.

Rhode Island seems to be understanding the need for high quality early childhood care and education, as we creep our way out of the COVID-19 pandemic. The state's commitment to supporting early educators by using federal funds to provide bonus payments has been important in trying to stop the problem of providers leaving the early educator field. But we must do more to fix the long-term structural problem to ensure providers are paid sufficiently to keep them in working in early education. This bill focuses on this structural piece.

Currently, without temporary bonuses, child care workers in Rhode Island are the lowest paid educators in the state at an average of \$12/hour. Our early learning market is sustained by learning professionals who forgo a living wage, despite the sophistication of their work. However, their patience is wearing thin, and we are seeing a crisis of staffing. Inadequate compensation for early educators is resulting in a crisis of staff turnover.

Why focus on compensation for early educators? Because inadequate pay is creating high turnover of early educators throughout Rhode Island:

- More than 1 in 4 (27%) educators in child care centers leave the field
- More than 1 in 5 (22%) family home visitors leave the field
- More than 1 in 7 (15%) early interventionists leave the field¹

These statistics reflect pre-pandemic conditions. In addition to these statistics, a more recent pre-pandemic workforce needs assessment from 2019 shows that these conditions have worsened over time. In 2019, 77% of Family Visiting programs and 83% of Early Intervention programs assessed had turnover at the lead and/or assistant teacher level since 2018. In addition, 61% of center based child care program directors reported turnover of teachers over the course of 2018-2019.²

¹ Improving the Compensation and Retention of Effective Infant/Toddler Educators in Rhode Island: Recommendations of the Moving the Needle on Compensation Task Force, December 2019, Appendix 2

² Abt Associates, Rhode Island PDG B-5 Workforce Needs Assessment Final Report, October 2019

In regard to the child care industry specifically, programs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have had fewer tuition-paying families due to capacity limits. This means that programs have had decreased revenues while their operating costs have increased. A 2020 survey conducted by the Department of Human Services (DHS) aimed at understanding the impact of COVID-19 on RI child care programs found that programs have experienced, on average, a 76% increase in monthly costs associated with the implementation of new COVID-19 health and safety standards.³

Further, a survey conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children found that 69% of child care programs reported that recruiting and retaining qualified staff has become more difficult since the pandemic. With new financial burdens and increasing turnover rates, child care programs struggle to survive, intensifying the presence of child care deserts throughout Rhode Island.⁴

Insufficient staff leads to insufficient access, harming women and their children

About half of Rhode Island's population lives in a "child care desert" - a neighborhood or community in which child care options are lacking completely or have so few providers that there are more than three children for every licensed child care slot.⁵

In Rhode Island, child care deserts are found throughout each county, and are prominent in many low and middle-income communities, such as Pawtucket, Central Falls, Woonsocket, West Warwick, Bristol, and Newport.⁶

Significantly, child care deserts impact employment, as on average child care deserts have maternal labor force participation rates that are 3 percentage points lower than areas where child care is readily available. Existing research has found that providing low- and middle-income families with access to child care would enable an estimated 1.6 million more mothers to enter the workforce alone, helping to sustain and expand national and local workforces.⁷

Pre-pandemic in Rhode Island, 94% of workers involuntarily working in part-time positions due to inadequate childcare were women.⁸ Without access to childcare pre-COVID-19, Rhode Island's low to modest-income women were forced to reduce work hours and were unable to attend educational trainings to upgrade work skills, both of which inhibited the growth of talent pools available for Rhode Island businesses. COVID-19 has exacerbated this reality. Recent research shows that due to school and child care closures, mothers with young children have arranged reductions to their work hours that are 4-5 times greater than reductions arranged by fathers.

³ RI Department of Human Services, "COVID-19 Impact Survey Series Summary of Key Findings", October- December 2020

⁴ National Association for the Education of Young Children, "Am I Next? Sacrificing to Stay Open, Child Care Providers Face a Bleak Future Without Relief", December 2020 ^{vi} Sarah Savage, "High-Quality Early Child Care: A Critical Piece of the Workforce Infrastructure," Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, May 2019, <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/one-time-pubs/high-quality-early-child-care.aspx>

⁵ Sarah Savage, "High-Quality Early Child Care: A Critical Piece of the Workforce Infrastructure," Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, May 2019, <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/one-time-pubs/high-quality-early-child-care.aspx>

⁶ Rasheed Malik, Katie Hamm, Leila Schochet, Cristina Novoa, Simon Workman, & Steven Jessen-Howard, "America's Childcare Deserts in 2018," Center for American Progress, December 2018, childcaredeserts.org/index.html?state=RI

⁷ Leila Schochet, "The Child Care Crisis Is Keeping Women Out of the Workforce," Center for American Progress, March 2019 ⁱ

⁸ Id.

Further, in September 2020 alone, four times as many women as men dropped out of the labor force.⁹ As mothers have been particularly burdened with child caregiving obligations over the pandemic, access to quality, affordable child care is a necessary precondition for Rhode Island's women to return to the workforce post-pandemic. However, for mothers living in child care deserts, which are predominantly in low and middle-income communities, this will likely not be possible. **Thus, investment in Rhode Island's child care workforce is critical now to prevent child care deserts from worsening across the state and barring mothers with low- and middle-incomes from Rhode Island's workforce.** Without state relief to aid child care programs retain talented educators, Rhode Island families, especially those with low-incomes, will be at-risk for lacking access to quality, affordable care needed to either remain employed during this pandemic or regain employment post-pandemic.

We urge the General Assembly to pass Senator Cano's bill so that the state can focus on building a stronger and more equitable child care and early education sector for all Rhode Island families and children. Rhode Island can buffer against the adverse impacts brought on by COVID-19 by establishing a cross-departmental target wage scale for early educators and advancing strategies to improve compensation so that there is parity with public school educators with comparable credentials.

⁹ Julie Kashen, Sarah Jane Glynn, and Amanda Novello, "How COVID-19 Sent Women's Workforce Progress Backward", Center for American Progress, October 2020