

Testimony to the House Committee on Health, Education
and Welfare
Wednesday, March 4, 2020

Good afternoon. My name is Dana Mullen, and I am the Chief of Programs at Children's Friend.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding House Bill No. 7271, Rhode Island Early Educator Investment Act, and a bill that Children's Friend supports.

This planning bill contains several sections including increased compensation for early educators, early interventionists, and home visitors. We believe increased compensation would enable us to attract and retain high-quality staff. The years between birth and five are critical for brain development and research has shown that high-quality pre-school education and wrap-around services give kids a strong start in life. High-quality early learning environments are not possible without qualified teachers who are trained in child development and understand the importance of these critical years.

We've known for a long time how important early childhood is. But new brain science tells us just how crucial positive learning environments, nurturing adult-child relationships, and experiences are for kids' health and well-being throughout life.

A strong, integrated system to support infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and their families in high-quality learning environments, as well as in their home, is critical to our entire Rhode Island community.

We know that relationship-based coaching strategies are effective and we use them in both our home visiting and early childhood programs.

Staff turnover, due to low compensation, cripples our ability to do this and interferes with the young child's ability to form positive and lasting relationships with their caregivers. A child's ability to trust and rely on their educators and primary caregiver is a major aspect of early learning that leads to positive outcomes for children and stable life-long learning.

We have experienced a teacher shortage at an almost crisis level. In 2019, we experienced a classroom turnover rate of 18%. Forty-percent of classroom staff that left in 2019 was hired in 2019, indicating the difficulty with retaining new staff. In a recently analyzed sample of exit interviews, staff noted money as the main reason for their leaving.

Increased wages for those working with our state's most vulnerable young children would allow early learning and home visiting programs to attract, develop and retain experienced and appropriately educated professionals who can provide the best learning and developmental experiences for our state's youngest residents. It is our goal that young children enter school ready and eager to learn and that their families are ready to support their success. This can only happen when their teachers understand how young children learn, can individualize for their specific learning and are present in their classrooms day-after-day. This is what our young children need and deserve.

Thank you for your attention and consideration of my testimony.