

May 3, 2023



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one child at a time.



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childrensfriendri.org



Chairman Marvin Abney
House Finance Committee
Rhode Island General Assembly
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Re: In support of Representative McNamara's bill H6009

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the Committee,

We write in strong support of Representative McNamara's bill to increase funding for Rhode Island Pre-K, Head Start, and Early Head Start classrooms.

For 189 years, we at Children's Friend have worked to advance the well-being and healthy development of Rhode Island's youngest and most vulnerable children. Today, alongside our permanency, home visiting, childcare, and nutrition services, we provide high-quality Pre-K education to over 170 four-year-olds in our State-funded Pre-K classrooms. We also serve over 600 three (3) and four (4) year-old children in our Head Start and Early Head Start programs. For the families with whom we work, over 90% are earning less than the federal poverty level. Our Pre-K, childcare, and Head Start classrooms are a lifeline that enables them to go to work each day and strive for a better future for their children.

At Children's Friend, we pride ourselves on ensuring seamless quality programming for children in all of our four-year-old classrooms, whether they are childcare, Head Start, or Pre-K. However, the funding needs to be more equitable across these programs, and teachers' salaries reflect this inequality. While Pre-K has seen an increase in State funding over the last 18 years, Head Start has seen a decrease. Not surprisingly, Pre-K teachers make more than Head Start and childcare teachers; and all make less than Kindergarten teachers.

The lack of focused funding for Head Start, combined with the post-Pandemic staffing crisis in education generally, has been extremely hard on our Head Start programs. We now have 150 children on our waitlist for Head Start classrooms. We have 18 of both Head Start and Early Head classrooms closed because we are unable to find qualified staff to lead them.

We support Representative McNamara's bill because it addresses several of the problems in the early learning system, including preventing the closure of 800 RI Pre-K seats for the 2023-2024 school year after federal preschool expansion funds have expired. It will also ensure that the State's Pre-K expansion plan includes the Head Start model and sets spending benchmarks to sustain and expand access to high-quality infant/toddler early care and education (including Early Head Start).

In addition, we are glad to see that this bill focuses on providing complete wages for staff in the Pre-K and the Head Start classrooms. We enthusiastically support



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protecting and expanding Pre-K but know that for it to be successful, the expansion must be part of a larger effort to shore up the entire early learning system – especially regarding staff salaries.

We cannot fund one part of this system while ignoring the others. Therefore, we applaud the provisions in this bill to ensure competitive wages for Head Start staff to keep classrooms open. Without this funding, many children will miss out on this important program that ensures they enter school ready to learn.

Thank you for your time and review of this testimony and for your continued efforts to support the children who are the future of our State. If you have further questions or need additional information, please contact me at dcaprio@cfsri.org.

Sincerely, 

David Caprio
President and CEO