



# Children's FRIEND

Making a difference...  
one child at a time.



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March 19, 2024

Chairs DiPalma and Cano  
Senate Committee on Finance and  
Senate Committee on Education  
RI State House  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Testimony regarding the Governor's FY2025 Budget vis a vis Article 8

Dear Chair DiPalma, Chair Cano, and members of the committee,

Our testimony today concerns the Governor's FY2025 proposed budget related to the Rhode Island Department of Education. **Children's Friend supports the intent of the Governor's proposed budget to include \$7.1 million in general revenue to expand the RI Pre-K program but encourages the state to ensure that this investment is not done in isolation, but instead in conjunction with, also investing in shoring up infant and toddler early learning programs.**

For 190 years, we at Children's Friend have worked to advance the well-being and healthy development of the youngest and most vulnerable children in Rhode Island. Today, alongside our permanency, home visiting, child care, Head Start and nutrition services, we provide high quality pre-k education to over 171 four-year-olds in our state funded Pre-K classrooms. For the families with whom we work, most of whom are earning less than the federal poverty level, our Pre-k, child care 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.

We wholeheartedly support expanding pre-k, but also strongly encourage the state to ensure that this expansion be part of a larger effort to shore up the entire early learning system – especially as it relates to staff salaries. We cannot fund one part of this system while ignoring the others. At Children's Friend, we pride ourselves in ensuring seamless quality programming for children in all of our 4-year-old classrooms whether they are child care, Head Start or Pre-k. But the funding for teacher salaries is not equitable across these programs and funding these programs piecemeal will only cause staff to move between these depending on which is better funded, rather than encouraging more staff to come into the system.



## Making a difference... one child at a time.

Although the state has already put out a RFP for new pre-k classrooms, we will not be applying for additional classrooms. We simply do not have the staff to open new pre-k classrooms right now. We understand other agencies like ours are in the same boat. The needed workforce does not exist to expand so rapidly this year.

Evidence from other states who have rapidly expanded pre-k shows that they often do this by poaching teachers from infant and toddler classrooms. We understand that is why the state's RI Pre-K state plan includes a suggested a set-aside amount for infant and toddler salaries when expanding pre-k.

The RI State Pre-K Plan from December 2022 stated: "a potential unintended consequence of expanding pre-kindergarten programming can be a reduction in infant/toddler capacity. RI already has a crisis in access and affordability for infant/toddler care and causing greater disruption in this space will lead to significant economic disruption and make it difficult for young parents to participate in the workforce." The report recommends between a 10% and 30% Infant/Toddler Set Aside to ensure continued support for infant/toddler capacity as the state expands Pre-k.

Taking staff from infant/toddler programs would make a bad situation even worse. We have over 100 children on a wait list for infant and toddler slots currently. And that number under-represents the need, because many parents don't bother to put their name on the list after they hear how long the wait is to get into a program.

Please invest in BOTH pre-K expansion and programs for infants and toddlers such as Early Head Start and infant/toddler child care.

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 any additional information, please contact me at [dcaprio@cfsri.org](mailto:dcaprio@cfsri.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David Caprio".

David Caprio  
President and CEO