

2026 -- H 7054

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LC003588

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S T A T E O F R H O D E I S L A N D

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2026

A N A C T

**RELATING TO EDUCATION -- THE RHODE ISLAND PREKINDERGARTEN
EDUCATION ACT**

Introduced By: Representatives McNamara, Cotter, Solomon, Potter, Voas, Ackerman, Cruz, Giraldo, J. Lombardi, and Hull

Date Introduced: January 09, 2026

Referred To: House Finance

It is enacted by the General Assembly as follows:

1 SECTION 1. Sections 16-87-2 and 16-87-4 of the General Laws in Chapter 16-87 entitled

2 "Rhode Island Prekindergarten Education Act" are hereby amended to read as follows:

3 **16-87-2. Findings.**

4 (a) The general assembly hereby finds that attending high quality early childhood education

5 programs ~~help~~ helps children develop important social and cognitive skills and knowledge that

6 prepares children to succeed in school. Research has shown long-lasting benefits for children who

7 participate in very high quality, educationally focused early childhood programs. The benefits to

8 children can also generate substantial government cost savings, including reduced need for special

9 education services, reduced need for cash assistance and other public benefits, and reduced rates of

10 incarceration.

11 (b) The general assembly finds that there are substantial numbers of children in Rhode

12 Island entering kindergarten who are not adequately prepared to succeed in school. Early school

13 failure may ultimately contribute to such children dropping out of school at an early age, failing to

14 achieve their full potential, becoming dependent upon public assistance, or becoming involved in

15 criminal activities.

16 (c) Furthermore, the general assembly finds that there is an existing infrastructure of early

17 childhood programs in Rhode Island serving preschool age children in full-day and half-day

18 programs that is supported through state and federal investments in child care, Head Start and

1 special education. It is the goal of the general assembly to support a system of publicly-funded,
2 high quality prekindergarten education programs that are operated through a diverse delivery
3 network, including child care, Head Start and public school districts.

4 (d) By enacting this law, the general assembly acknowledges the need to adequately
5 prepare all children to succeed in school by providing access to publicly-funded high quality
6 prekindergarten education programs for all children ages three (3) and four (4) and to sustain and
7 expand access to high-quality early care and education programs for infants and toddlers under age
8 three (3) years.

9 **16-87-4. Early childhood workforce development.**

10 (a) The Rhode Island department of elementary and secondary education shall work with
11 the department of human services to sustain and expand the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Program,
12 ~~other state departments and private philanthropy to establish~~ a statewide, comprehensive, research-
13 based early childhood workforce development scholarship program to expand the number of early
14 childhood educators who have an associate's or bachelor's degree in early childhood education and
15 who work with children from birth to age five (5).

16 (b)(1) In furtherance of the goals set forth in this chapter, no later than January 1, 2023, the
17 governor's workforce board shall convene a working group comprised of representatives from the
18 department of elementary and secondary education, department of human services, office of the
19 postsecondary commissioner, the RI early learning council, organized labor, and early childhood
20 education industry employers, whose purpose shall be to identify barriers to entry into the early
21 childhood education workforce, and to design accessible and accelerated pathways into the
22 workforce, including, but not limited to, registered apprenticeships and postsecondary credit for
23 prior work experience.

24 (2) No later than April 1, 2023, the working group shall provide the general assembly with
25 recommendations for addressing the barriers to workforce entry and implementing the solutions
26 identified by the working group; the recommendations shall outline any administrative and
27 legislative action that would be required by participating agencies to implement the
28 recommendations.

29 SECTION 2. Chapter 16-87 of the General Laws entitled "Rhode Island Prekindergarten
30 Education Act" is hereby amended by adding thereto the following section:

31 **16-87-8. Prekindergarten implementation and expansion.**

32 (a) The state managed prekindergarten program model shall be sustained and, as funds are
33 available, expanded in a mixed delivery-system that includes Head Start programs, local education
34 agencies, licensed center-based child care providers, and licensed family child care providers or

1 family child care networks so that no less than seventy percent (70%) of all children ages three (3)
2 and four (4) are enrolled in high-quality prekindergarten options.

3 (b) The department of elementary and secondary education (the "department") is hereby
4 authorized to promulgate and adopt rules and regulations for the implementation of high-quality
5 prekindergarten. Research-based quality standards shall be defined in regulation by the department
6 and shall meet or exceed the recommended quality standards for state preschool programs outlined
7 by the National Institute for Early Education Research and/or the federal Head Start Performance
8 Standards. Quality standards shall include, but not be limited to:

9 (1) Teacher education and certification;
10 (2) Class size and staff ratios;
11 (3) Learning time;
12 (4) Developmentally appropriate, evidence-based learning standards;
13 (5) Curriculum prioritizing developmentally appropriate, play-based learning;
14 (6) Access, inclusion and support for students with special needs, including a system to
15 ensure delivery of high-quality, inclusive early education services required by the federal
16 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. §1400 et seq. (2004), to children with
17 developmental delays and disabilities who are enrolled in community-based programs which may
18 or may not be located in the same municipality where the child lives;
19 (7) Support for English language learners;
20 (8) Professional development;
21 (9) Child assessments; and
22 (10) Observations and coaching to improve practice.

23 (c) To whatever extent deemed appropriate and efficient by the department, quality
24 standards may be differentiated by prekindergarten education setting and include federal support
25 and oversight for the Head Start Performance Standards, such that every provider-type in a mixed-
26 delivery model is able and expected to meet research-based quality standards.

27 (d) Funds to sustain and expand prekindergarten and Head Start shall be allocated to ensure
28 teacher wages and benefits are competitive with similarly qualified kindergarten teacher wages and
29 benefits.

30 (e) Beginning July 1, 2026, any new state general revenue funding allocated for expansion
31 of the Rhode Island prekindergarten program shall include a thirty percent (30%) set-aside of
32 funding to be administered by the department of human services to sustain and expand access to
33 high-quality child care and early learning programs for infants and toddlers, including Early Head
34 Start.

1 SECTION 3. This act shall take effect upon passage.

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EXPLANATION
BY THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
OF
A N A C T
RELATING TO EDUCATION -- THE RHODE ISLAND PREKINDERGARTEN
EDUCATION ACT

- 1 This act would direct the department of elementary and secondary education to establish
- 2 guidelines for the continued implementation and expansion of public, high quality prekindergarten
- 3 education programs with the goal of reaching all children ages three (3) and four (4) throughout
- 4 Rhode Island to increase children's school readiness. This act would further authorize the
- 5 development of regulations to ensure high-quality prekindergarten services, require competitive
- 6 wages and benefits for prekindergarten and Head Start teachers, and would require a 30% funding
- 7 set-aside of prekindergarten expansion funds to sustain and expand access to high-quality child
- 8 care and early learning programs for infants and toddlers.
- 9 This act would take effect upon passage.

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