

2026 -- H 8163

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LC005823
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STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2026

A N A C T

RELATING TO EDUCATION -- RHODE ISLAND PREKINDERGARTEN EDUCATION
ACT

Introduced By: Representatives McNamara, Cotter, Solomon, Potter, and Carson

Date Introduced: February 27, 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 children develop important social and cognitive skills and knowledge that prepares
6 children to succeed in school. Research has shown long-lasting benefits for children who participate
7 in very high quality, educationally focused early childhood programs. The benefits to children can
8 also generate substantial government cost savings, including reduced need for special education
9 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) The general assembly also finds that Head Start programs have provided
5 comprehensive services and high-quality early childhood education to children and families for
6 decades, improving children’s cognitive, language, and social-emotional skills as well as reducing
7 family conflict and improving family educational attainment and self-sufficiency. Rhode Island
8 invests state funds to sustain and expand access to Head Start, support more competitive teacher
9 salaries, and help programs meet their federally-required twenty percent (20%) state or local
10 funding match.

11 ~~(d)~~(e) By enacting this law, the general assembly acknowledges the need to adequately
12 prepare all children to succeed in school by providing access to publicly-funded high quality
13 prekindergarten education programs for all children ages three (3) and four (4) through both the
14 state managed prekindergarten program and the federally-managed Head Start program.

15 **16-87-4. Early childhood workforce development.**

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

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

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

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

3 **16-87-8. Prekindergarten implementation and expansion.**

4 (a) The state prekindergarten program model, managed by the department of elementary
5 and secondary education, shall be sustained and, as funds are available, expanded in a mixed-
6 delivery system that includes Head Start programs, local education agencies, licensed center-based
7 childcare providers, and licensed family childcare providers or family childcare networks in order
8 that no less than seventy percent (70%) of all children ages three (3) and four (4) are enrolled in
9 high-quality prekindergarten options.

10 (b) The department of elementary and secondary education is hereby authorized to
11 promulgate and adopt rules and regulations for the implementation of the state-managed high-
12 quality prekindergarten options.

13 (c) Research-based quality standards for the state-managed prekindergarten program shall
14 be defined in rules and regulations promulgated by the department and shall meet or exceed the
15 recommended quality standards for state preschool programs outlined by the National Institute for
16 Early Education Research or the federal Head Start Performance Standards. Quality standards shall
17 include, but not be limited to:

18 (1) Teacher education and certification;

19 (2) Class size and staff ratios;

20 (3) Learning time;

21 (4) Developmentally appropriate, evidence-based learning standards;

22 (5) Curriculum prioritizing developmentally appropriate, play-based learning;

23 (6) Access, inclusion and support for students with special needs, including a system to
24 ensure delivery of high-quality, inclusive early education services required by the Individuals with
25 Disabilities Education Act to children with developmental delays and disabilities who are enrolled
26 in community-based programs which may or may not be located in the same municipality where
27 the child lives;

28 (7) Support for English language learners;

29 (8) Professional development;

30 (9) Child assessments; and

31 (10) Observations and coaching to improve practice.

32 (d) To whatever extent deemed appropriate and efficient by the department, quality
33 standards may be differentiated by prekindergarten education setting and include federal support
34 and oversight for the Head Start Performance Standards, such that every provider in a mixed

1 delivery model is able and expected to meet research-based quality standards.
2 (e) Funds to sustain and expand the state prekindergarten program managed by the
3 department of elementary and secondary education and funds to sustain and expand access to Head
4 Start programs in Rhode Island, managed by the department of human services, shall be allocated
5 and regularly adjusted to ensure teacher wages and benefits are competitive with similarly qualified
6 kindergarten teacher wages and benefits.

7 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 -- RHODE ISLAND PREKINDERGARTEN EDUCATION
ACT

1 This act would establish guidelines, rules and regulations for the implementation and
2 expansion of high-quality public prekindergarten education programs for children ages three (3)
3 and four (4) to increase children's school readiness and to ensure high quality prekindergarten
4 services are available statewide and coordinated together by the department of elementary and
5 secondary education and the department of human services.

6 This act would take effect upon passage.

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