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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 EARLY EDUCATOR WORKFORCE ACT

Introduced By: Senators Urso, Quezada, Gallo, Zurier, Murray, DiPalma, and Bissaillon

Date Introduced: January 30, 2026

Referred To: Senate Finance

It is enacted by the General Assembly as follows:

1 SECTION 1. The general assembly hereby finds that:

2 (1) Young children's healthy brain development and learning depends on consistent,
3 nurturing care and enriching learning opportunities at home and in early care and education settings.
4 Starting at birth, day-to-day interactions with family members and early educators shape children's
5 brain architecture upon which all future learning and development is built.

6 (2) Many of the early educators in Rhode Island earn very low wages even when they
7 achieve credentials equivalent to kindergarten teachers and demonstrate effective practices.
8 Licensed child care and early learning programs across the state report difficulty attracting,
9 developing, and retaining effective early childhood professionals.

10 (3) A 2019 statewide survey of early childhood professionals in Rhode Island found that
11 over forty percent (40%) of infant/toddler educators worried about having enough food to feed their
12 family and fifty percent (50%) worried about having enough money to pay for housing.

13 (4) The 2019 statewide survey also found that almost one-third (1/3) of early educators had
14 a second job to help make ends meet and almost two-thirds (2/3) reported that they plan to leave
15 their early education job if the compensation does not improve. And yet, most report that they enjoy
16 working with children and families and many have earned college credits and degrees in child
17 development and early education.

18 (5) A landmark report issued by the National Academy of Science found that educators of
19 young children, including infants and toddlers, need the same high level of knowledge and

competencies as teachers of older children and that educational qualifications and compensation of early educators should be equivalent to those of kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) teachers.

(6) According to 2024 data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average wage for a child care teacher in Rhode Island was among the lowest for all occupations in the state at sixteen dollars and seventy-four cents (\$16.74) per hour.

(7) Since January 2020, the minimum wage in Rhode Island has increased 52% from \$10.50/hour to \$16.00/hour and will reach \$17.00 in January 2027.

(8) Child care programs struggle to meet minimum wage laws and to pay wages that are adequate to retain their most qualified educators who have earned child development credentials and early childhood education degrees. The child care system, though funded partly with public dollars, relies heavily on payments from working parents with young children. Unless public dollars increase, programs are forced to raise tuition and fees for middle income families in order to raise wages, retain staff, and keep the program open.

(9) By enacting this act, the general assembly acknowledges the need to sustain and strengthen strategies to help licensed child care and early learning programs attract, develop, and retain effective educators to care for and educate children.

SECTION 2. Title 16 of the General Laws entitled "EDUCATION" is hereby amended by adding thereto the following chapter:

CHAPTER 117

RHODE ISLAND EARLY EDUCATOR WORKFORCE ACT

16-117-1. Short title.

This chapter shall be known and may be cited as the "Rhode Island Early Educator Workforce Act."

16-117-2. Stabilizing and strengthening the early educator workforce.

The department of human services and the department of elementary and secondary education, shall work in collaboration to:

(1) Manage the Rhode Island T.E.A.C.H. early childhood program, the statewide, comprehensive, research-based workforce development scholarship program established under § 16-87-4 to support attainment of the national Child Development Associate credential and completion of college coursework and degrees in early childhood education and child or youth development.

(2) Manage registered apprenticeships for early educators that support attainment of national credentials, college coursework and degrees while providing opportunities to develop high-quality practices through regular on-the-job coaching by master early educators.

1 (3) Allocate sufficient funds of at least one million dollars (\$1,000,000) per year to
2 continue the Child Care WAGE\$ program, a national model designed to improve compensation,
3 education, and retention of early educators by providing education-based salary supplements to
4 lower-paid center-based educators and family childcare providers working with children in licensed
5 early childhood programs.

6 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 EARLY EDUCATOR WORKFORCE ACT

1 This act would direct the department of human services and the department of elementary
2 and secondary education to work collaboratively to manage existing workforce development and
3 compensation programs for educators working in licensed child care and early learning programs
4 statewide and would allocate at least \$1,000,000 to continue the Child Care WAGE\$ model to help
5 strengthen and sustain the child care workforce.

6 This act would take effect upon passage.

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