

# Strengthening Rhode Island's Early Childhood System

## Using Federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Funds: 2021 Summary

The federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Renewal (PDG) program aims to support states' development of early childhood systems by building on existing programs and investments. Specifically, PDG asks states to focus on five major activities: aligning existing programs, engaging families in the early learning system, building on the success of existing programs, fostering partnerships among stakeholders, and leveraging data to drive decisions. In 2020, RI was one of 23 states to receive a competitive three-year PDG B-5 renewal award to support implementation of their strategic plans.

**In 2021, Rhode Island has leveraged the PDG funding to support more than 25 activities across four state agencies leading to:**



**Children**

Expanded programming, such as RI Pre-K, benefiting more than 900 children directly.



**Families**

More than 1,600 families receiving additional services through initiatives, such as those offered by RI's Health Equity Zones.



**Workforce**

Pilot innovations supporting additional trainings and supports for professionals across the field.



**Systems**

Shared goals & governance, which has created more cohesive, coordinated decisions across our system and leverages additional investments.

Rhode Island received an initial one-year planning grant in 2019 which enabled the State to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment and write a strategic plan. In 2020, Rhode Island was awarded a three-year \$8.943 million PDG renewal grant to support the implementation of our Strategic Plan. PDG funding has been crucial to strengthening Rhode Island's early childhood system with activities benefitting children, families, early childhood professionals, and the system as a whole. Rhode Island is using funds to complete more than 25 activities across the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), the Department of Education (RIDE), the Department of Health (RIDOH), and the Department of Human Services (DHS).<sup>1</sup>



**Children**

*Children are the center of RI's work. PDG funds have allowed for the expansion of evidence-based and nationally recognized programs to serve more Rhode Island children.*

- **Increasing supply of high-quality infant / toddler care:** Responding to our 2019 Needs Assessment which called for additional high-quality infant and toddler care, DHS uses PDG to provide funds to 12 child care sites to participate in a model based on the evidence-informed Early Head Start Child Care Partnership model. Partner child care providers receive resources including high-quality curriculum and materials, as well as trainings and coaching to strengthen the quality of their infant toddler programs. Fifty-eight infants and toddlers are enrolled in this high-quality model.

<sup>1</sup> This resource provides a high-level overview of RI's PDG efforts and how those activities support each part of our overall system, however this is by no means an exhaustive list of the work completed or underway.

- **Expanding RI Pre-K:** PDG’s investment has dramatically accelerated the expansion of Rhode Island’s nationally recognized RI Pre-K program, which has also allowed RI to leverage other federal funds to further expand the program. In the 2021-2022 school year, PDG funded 552 RI Pre-K seats, with additional federal funds supporting 286 more seats. RI Pre-K serves 2,364 children across 18 communities, approximately 33% of our universally accessible goal of 7,000 seats for 4-year-olds. The 838 seats that are supported by federal funding represent a 66.5% increase in RI Pre-K seats between the 2019-2020 school year and the 2021-2022 school year. Additional funding to preserve current seats will be needed when PDG and other time-limited federal funds end in 2023.
- **Increasing capacity of the Parents as Teachers program:** RI expanded the evidence-based home visiting program, Parents as Teachers, by 300 spots. Home visiting is a crucial service that, among other things, helps families connect and coordinate with multiple service providers. Home visitors often provide additional referrals for children across the early childhood system and work to support the individual needs of families. PDG funds have nearly doubled the capacity of Parents as Teachers in RI and have offered access to key services for additional families.



### Families

*Families and caregivers are children’s first teachers. PDG funding has supported efforts to engage families throughout RI’s system.*

- **Health Equity Zones & Family Navigators:** PDG funding has supported two initiatives at local [Health Equity Zones](#) (HEZs) that enhance parent knowledge, choice, and navigation of RI’s early childhood system. The pilot programs take advantage of existing HEZ partnerships to deliver services to families in their local communities, which enhances the coordination of services. The initiatives also help deliver services to families in the existing HEZ settings while using the existing infrastructure of HEZs.
  - **Family Navigators** help connect families with needed services. In 2021, more than 400 families connected with Family Navigators and were referred to additional services, such as nutrition programs, programs supporting parents, and the Child Care Assistance Program.
  - **Family Programming** is responsive to community need and includes offerings such as the Incredible Years parent support programming and play groups that use resources from evidence-based Family Home Visiting programs. In 2021, more than 1,170 families accessed this programming through HEZs.

“PDG funding supports HEZs in becoming central access points for services. These funds have allowed our Family Navigator to create programs that meet families’ needs including play and learn groups that support children and families.”

– East Providence HEZ

“Our Family Navigator has made a difference in the lives of many families, including a mother and daughter who were experiencing domestic violence. The Navigator was able to connect them with resources for food support through SNAP and connected them to resources for an emergency apartment. Now, they live in a safe and stable home, where they are also receiving additional services, including mental health supports.”

– Central Providence HEZ

- **Public Action Campaign:** Communicating with families about what programming that is available in Rhode Island has been critical, especially during the pandemic. PDG funds have supported the creation of [kids.ri.gov](https://kids.ri.gov) which centralizes resources from across state government relevant for young children and their families. Additionally, this campaign has supported bilingual communications about the importance of well-child visits and the availability of child care and other services during the pandemic.

- **Family Voice in Governance:** RIDOH has used PDG funding to facilitate a Parent / Caregiver Advisory Council (P/CAC). This group meets monthly to discuss various topics and to engage with State and Community leaders. In 2021, the P/CAC elected officers from within the group, ensuring that caregiver participants are leading the meetings and setting agendas, with the State staff team in a support role. The P/CAC has been an important venue for State staff to bring proposals for feedback and questions including our work to analyze data and get feedback on our family survey.



### Workforce

*The early childhood professionals that care for and teach our youngest learners are invaluable, yet they are too often undercompensated and undervalued. PDG funding has supported various initiatives that expand and support the early learning workforce.*

- **Enhanced professional development opportunities:** PDG funding supports various initiatives – including trainings, on-site technical assistance, and communities of practice for educators to come together – which support the incumbent workforce to deliver high-quality services to children and their families.
  - **RI Pre-K Professional Development:** Provides technical assistance and trainings for RI Pre-K classroom educators funded through PDG including trainings on high-quality curriculum and social emotional learning. This ensures that all RI Pre-K educators have the support they need to deliver high-quality instruction.
  - **Infant / toddler mental health:** Family home visitors have access to additional resources, including reflective supervision, to support infant and toddler mental health.
  - **Pre-Service Trainings:** Created bilingual health and safety trainings for early educators. Since the launch of the trainings, more than 2,000 educators have logged on to complete training, with more than 19,000 individual courses finished.
- **New credential pathways:** Through two initiatives, PDG efforts have focused on supporting the incumbent workforce in attaining higher education credits by responding to their specific needs to increase accessibility and relevance:
  - **Registered Apprenticeships:** DHS piloted an apprenticeship program for infant and toddler assistant and lead teachers. In 2021, more than 20 apprenticeship / mentor pairs were part of three cohorts. Apprentices received trainings and supervision as they worked towards their Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or a 12-credit college program.
  - **Credential Pathways:** To continue expanding RI Pre-K, RIDE used PDG funds to develop a pathway for incumbent early childhood educators who want to pursue their pre-k - 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teaching certification. Working with the University of Rhode Island, in collaboration with the Community College of Rhode Island, this pathway will feature course work designed around working educators' schedule and unique needs.



### Systems

*To continue advancing direct service work, Rhode Island needs strong systems that efficiently leverage all available resources.*

- **Streamlined Cross-Agency Decisions:** Rhode Island's early childhood Governance Committee is made up of leaders from EOHHS, RIDE, RIDOH, DHS, and the Governor's Office. In year three of the implementation phase, this group offers a consistent venue for discussion on our State Strategic Plan and a venue to bring decisions that impact early childhood policy at the state level across state agencies. In 2021, key decisions made by the ECCE Governance Group included:

- Approval for additional pilot service delivery models for RI Pre-K, which is how 18.5% of seats were funded in the 2021-2022 school year
  - Feedback on and approval of performance metrics for RI's early childhood system
  - Discussed and approved priority projects, including stimulus investment priorities
  - Approved revised Strategic Plan strategies and actions for 2021
- **Leveraging Additional Funding Sources:** PDG investments and innovations allowed RI to use additional funding to support our early childhood system. This includes:
    - Layering funding to expand RI Pre-K, engage more providers in delivering RI Pre-K, and increase choice for families:
      - Using Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) quality funds to support existing CCAP-serving classrooms to implement RI Pre-K quality standards
      - Using federal Head Start funds and CCDBG funds as “first dollar in” for RI Pre-K providers who serve eligible children
    - Supporting the early childhood workforce by using funding from the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) stimulus funds to support early childhood educator pathways at the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner.
    - Through shared early childhood governance, defining investment priorities and developing funding proposals for the State Fiscal Recovery Fund, leading to more than \$40 million in investments for children and families
  - **Facilities Planning Grants:** In 2021, DHS used PDG funding to support 16 providers in accessing pre-development services, including architecture design, site analysis, engineering studies, legal service related to development, and environmental reviews. Following this work, providers are well positioned to leverage RI’s Early Learning Facilities Bond funding in the future.



**On the Horizon** *As implementation of PDG continues, we anticipate additional progress as we strengthen each component of RI’s early childhood system. These coordinated efforts will ensure that our system is better able to provide children, families, and educators with what they need to thrive.*

In the coming year, Rhode Island will continue to implement each of the PDG activities. In particular, RI plans to make substantial progress on improving operational data systems. In 2021, RI state staff engaged in extensive reviews of current early learning data systems to determine their current functionality and outline the future need for the system. Following the initial review of the existing and antiquated systems, the state is preparing to procure new technology that will serve providers and the state more effectively.

In 2022, RI will also plan for the on-going sustainability of programs that PDG currently supports. This includes understanding the impacts of activities and the continued engagement of stakeholders.