

GOVERNOR GINA RAIMONDO'S EDUCATION POLICY LEGACY: UNIVERSAL PRE-K IN RHODE ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

This issue was brought to light when the Honorable Gina M. Raimondo left the governorship behind and assumed office on March 3, 2021, to serve as the 40th U.S. Secretary of Commerce. Many asked, what would become of the initiatives she championed during her tenure? Rhode Island Universal Pre-Kindergarten (RI-UPK) was one of her signature policy goals and this research confirms the reasons behind the push, the progress made, and the challenges ahead. This thesis further highlights how the governorship plays a central role in effecting and steering education policy. Rhode Island's state funded Pre-K has been steadily adding more seats and even before Raimondo, it has maintained the highest quality benchmarks for over a decade according to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). Therefore, the smallest state in the nation demonstrates a bright spot in Early Childhood Education (ECE) within an otherwise regionally underperforming public school system. This is a dichotomy that beckons in-depth analysis and further explanation. I argue that RI UPK is a model for the rest of the country to follow based on its selection as the sole test site leading up to the 2020 Census. According to US Census data collectors, Rhode Island is a microcosm of the entire country, reflective of future demographic trends. Hence, a policy implementation strategy that proves either successful or unsuccessful offers valuable insights that are widely applicable across numerous states. This thesis also explains and

clarifies some contradictions in the larger debate over UPK implementation as well as chronically examining its evolution in RI. After conducting an empirical comparison and evaluation of case studies, state reports, and scholarly articles, I assert that RI UPK has the potential to serve as a national model. Analyzing a segment of Madam Secretary Raimondo's education legacy reveals that Rhode Island not only excels as a leader in providing consistent Early Childhood Education but also possesses unique characteristics that position it at the forefront of the nationwide Universal Pre-K (UPK) discussion.

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Abbreviations and Definitions:

Rhode Island Pre-Kindergarten (RI-PK) = refers to a tuition-free, inclusive pre-kindergarten program in Rhode Island, designed to prepare 4-year-old children for kindergarten. It operates across various communities in the state.

Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) = ensures that any family with a preschool-aged child can voluntarily enroll their child in a publicly-funded pre-kindergarten program. These programs serve as a foundation for early education.

Universal High Quality Pre-Kindergarten (UHQPK) = emphasizes high-quality standards within the UPK framework. It aims to provide consistent, nurturing, and developmentally-appropriate environments for young learners.

Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) = oversees education in Rhode Island, focusing on equity, student development, and critical thinking. It supports schools and educational initiatives.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) = assesses, improves, and

communicates the quality of early and school-age care and education programs. It assigns ratings based on defined standards.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) = encompasses educational programs for young children, including preschool and early elementary education.

National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) = conducts research and provides resources related to early childhood education, policy analysis, and program evaluation.

Early Care and Education (ECE) = includes both formal education settings (preschools) and informal care (family-based) for young children.

Local Education Agencies (LEA) = these are school districts or organizations that manage public education within specific geographic areas, overseeing schools and educational services.

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) = provides specialized services to young children with disabilities or developmental delays.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) = combines care and education for young children, promoting their overall development.

Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Programs (CECEP) = addresses various aspects of early childhood development, including education, health, and family support.

The Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards (RIELDS) = outlines learning expectations for Rhode Island children, guiding educators in various early childhood settings.

Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS) = measures student performance in English language arts and mathematics, informing educational outcomes.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all students of the Providence Public School District,
encouraging them to continue their pursuit of knowledge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am deeply grateful to everyone who inspired my pursuit of higher education, provided the flexibility for me to continue my studies, and guided me on this journey. Special thanks to my parents, Congressman David N. Cicilline, and Congressman Gabe Amo for their unwavering support. I further extend my heartfelt appreciation to Dr. R. Shep Melnick for his patience, insightful questions, confidence-building, and constant inspiration. I also want to acknowledge Chairman Gerald M. Easter, for his valuable structural input, and Department Administrator Shirley Gee for her continued counsel.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis embarks on a comprehensive examination of Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) initiatives in the State of Rhode Island, tracing its development from Governor Gina Raimondo's administration (2015) to the current legislative landscape in the 2024 session. The study commences by delving into Governor Raimondo's pioneering efforts in preschool expansion and education initiatives, recognizing her pivotal role as the most prominent advocate for UPK in Rhode Island, as evidenced by the incorporation of UPK provisions in her 2020 budget.

Next, the thesis delves into an analysis of the enduring impacts of these initiatives, juxtaposed with the approaches adopted by neighboring states. Then it concludes with a set of recommendations aimed at enhancing sustained policy advocacy in this realm. Through meticulous research, this thesis aims to document the evolution and advancement of UPK efforts within Rhode Island, critically examining the state's approach in comparison to others, emphasizing any successful strategies, and proposing actionable recommendations. By shedding light on the historical trajectory of UPK policies in Rhode Island, the study aims to offer a solid foundation for informed decision-making. It also underscores the significance of the Rhode Island experience in shaping discussions on early childhood education, contributing to a more nuanced discourse in this crucial domain.

1.0 CHAPTER 1 - OVERVIEW

As the first female Governor of the smallest state in the nation, Gina M. Raimondo left work unfinished when she was sworn in to serve as President Biden's new Secretary of Commerce on March 3, 2021. In a speech she delivered at the 2022 Newport Jazz Festival donor celebration, she described her transition as a classic case of “they will love you more when you’re gone” and indeed Rhode Islanders stand to benefit as Raimondo becomes increasingly influential. Her reputation on Capitol Hill has been shaped by reaching across the aisle, increasing U.S. global competitiveness, embracing innovation, and strengthening relations both foreign and domestic. From the outset, Governor Raimondo was not afraid to dive headfirst into the many issues plaguing the state, but one area proved persistently more challenging than the rest – education. Despite volatility in her approval ratings, few questioned her qualifications, resolve, and work ethic. By the time she left office towards the end of her second term as Governor, she had seen her fair share of successes and failures. Raimondo found initial victory passing a college free tuition program in 2018 (which I personally testified for in House Committee) but encountered additional resistance when urging colleagues to embrace the idea of universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK). When Raimondo championed this issue in 2019, it was indeed a tough sell at the State House amid budget concerns. However, in the post-covid landscape, legislators are re-evaluating this strategic initiative with

renewed interest (Nesi, 2022). Expanding access to early childhood education creates new jobs, affords more parents the ability to re-enter the workforce, and improves academic outcomes. Raimondo's heart was in the right place as a champion for UPK, but her advocacy efforts required more time. Rhode Island continues struggling overall in this domain, demonstrating regional weakness in public education despite spending as much per pupil as almost any neighboring state. The absence of widespread access to affordable high-quality childcare and the insufficient number of ESL classrooms are only a few of the many unanswered needs causing a generation to be left behind. This thesis analyzes the challenges and proposes solutions that will require among other measures, a broader awareness campaign, geographic targeting, and legislative coordination. Additionally, the U.S. Census Bureau in 2018 chose to focus solely on Rhode Island, adding depth to its demographic and geographic trends, which further broadens the scope of this study. While Raimondo's appointment as U.S. Commerce Secretary in 2021 stalled her ambitious gambit for education reform in Rhode Island, her early failure to garner public support has lately seen retribution with universal Pre-K initiatives in the state legislature gaining momentum.

1.1 BACKGROUND

Public sentiment regarding universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) policies has consistently favored their implementation, and Rhode Island is no exception. According to a recent annual poll on education sentiment conducted by URI (2023), a significant 68% of Rhode Islanders express support for increased funding for K-12

education, with widespread endorsement for UPK initiatives. Furthermore, the Rhode Island Senate is actively advocating for the implementation of a UPK policy within the state by 2028, as reported by Nesi (2022). This underscores a compelling and often overlooked case for Rhode Island to emerge as a regional leader in the realm of early childhood education in the years to come.

Former Rhode Island Governor and current U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Gina Raimondo, deserves commendation for her pivotal role in advancing early childhood education. While her initial proposal for UPK was overshadowed by the state's takeover of Providence Public Schools and the college free tuition initiative, Raimondo's unwavering vision propelled the concept toward realization. The strategic appointment of Angélica Infante-Green as the state's Education Commissioner in 2019 further underscores Raimondo's foresight. Infante-Green, previously the Deputy Commissioner in New York, brings extensive experience in bilingual education—an asset in a state where approximately 32% of the population under 5 years old is Hispanic or Latino. Raimondo set ambitious goals, aiming for UPK access for all four-year-olds by 2024. Notably, over the past five years, public sentiment has shifted from novelty to eager anticipation, highlighting the growing demand for UPK in Rhode Island.

1.1.1 Problem

Rhode Island's pursuit of a universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) policy remains incomplete despite the dedicated efforts of former Governor Gina M. Raimondo, members of the General Assembly, policy advocates, parents, and teachers. The complexity of this endeavor is compounded by divergent definitions of UPK, creating a

gap between scholarly perspectives and the practical outcomes observed in states that purport to have such policies. While an abundance of statistical data exists on Rhode Island's Pre-Kindergarten (RI-PK) programs, there is a lack of independent literature and rigorous analysis. Additionally, an understudied dimension pertains to the impact of demographic shifts on childhood racial and ethnic education disparities. As the state contemplates expanding Pre-K access, it must carefully consider these multifaceted variables to ensure equitable and effective implementation.

1.1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to document and enhance understanding of former Governor Gina M. Raimondo's efforts in UPK education reform. By bridging the gap between Rhode Island's emergence as a Pre-K leader and the statewide implementation of UPK, this research serves as a valuable resource for American policymakers at both state and federal levels. It is an analysis that delves into RI-PK from multiple angles—demographic, geographic, political, historical, and statistical. Shedding light as to why the Rhode Island UPK initiative encountered obstacles and how officials can navigate them more effectively in the future. Furthermore, this investigation offers insight into the strategic approaches employed by a prominent executive department head within President Biden's Cabinet.

While other states have extensively covered the field of UPK, Rhode Island presents a unique case study opportunity. Despite being a late entrant, the state has distinguished itself with exceptional program quality. However, it is essential to acknowledge that this study does not encompass every facet of RI PK, its complete

historical context, or the intricacies of its inner workings. Despite this limitation, the deliberate focus on the central role of the governor (as depicted in Figure 1) provides a solid foundation for ongoing dialogue and independent research. Moreover, this thesis advocates for positioning Rhode Island at the forefront of the UPK debate, offering compelling justification for this stance.

1.1.3 Questions

UPK has been a topic of particular interest and debate. To understand its trajectory in RI, this thesis delves into several key questions. First, what motivated the initial push for RI-UPK, and why has it not occurred? Second, what progress has RI PK made in terms of expanding access to its high-quality early childhood education? Third, what are the challenges facing RI UPK, and how can they be addressed to sustain and improve its delivery? Lastly, how does RI UPK contribute to the broader discourse on universal Pre-Kindergarten implementation in the United States?

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE

Despite its modest size, Rhode Island is a significant player in the UPK discourse. Indeed, smaller states offer unique advantages as experimental laboratories that their larger counterparts cannot easily replicate. On December 28, 2018, Governor Raimondo signed an executive order authorizing the creation of the Census Complete Count Committee for 2020, which was a pivotal step that set Rhode Island on the path to

becoming an ideal test case for broader policy implementation. As an active participant in several Committee meetings, I witnessed firsthand the groundwork being laid for this transformative initiative.

Rhode Island, a state composed of 39 municipalities—8 cities and 31 towns—spans a maximum length of 48 miles. Currently, state-funded Pre-K programs operate in 19 of these 39 communities, providing nearly 50% geographic coverage (NIEER, 2022). As Rhode Island continues to enhance its mixed delivery system, which has shown steady growth since 2016 (see Table 4), it sets a compelling example for the entire nation to follow. Notably, Providence County, within Rhode Island, played a pivotal role as the location for the sole official end-to-end 2020 Census test (Potyondy, 2017). The U.S. Census Bureau succinctly captured this significance: “For peak operations, Providence County is an ideal community to test and validate major operational threads, procedures, systems, and infrastructure, ensuring proper integration in preparation for the 2020 Census. Its demographics closely mirror those of the nation” (USCB FAQ, 2018).

The impact of this selection extends beyond the census itself. Congressional apportionments, the allocation of over \$600 billion in federal funds to states, and the groundbreaking test of online forms all relied on Rhode Island serving as the ideal model for the entire nation. Given that Rhode Island broadly reflects the demographics of the country, successful programs implemented within the state can serve as valuable models—applicable to a wide range of national districts. By maintaining exceptional quality and fostering continued improvement, Rhode Island exemplifies how effective policies can shape educational and demographic outcomes nationwide.

Rhode Island's population density is another crucial factor to consider. According to the 2020 Census data, Rhode Island ranks third in territorial population density within the United States, trailing only Washington D.C. (1) and New Jersey (2). It is followed by Puerto Rico (4), Massachusetts (5), and Connecticut (6). The National Center for Education Statistics highlights the impact of population density on education systems, emphasizing that higher densities can facilitate more efficient support for specialized education (1991). The U.S. Census further clarifies that when comparing population density values across different geographic areas, it's essential to recognize their relevance primarily for smaller regions, such as neighborhoods. This insight, highlighted by Cohen (2015), underscores the importance of context when interpreting density metrics. Notably, Providence County was strategically chosen for pre-census analysis due to its blend of urban and suburban neighborhoods. This mix contributes significantly to the county's statistical significance and informs broader discussions about education, infrastructure, and community development.

2.0 CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

The positive impact of UPK programs on cognitive development is well-established. Across the United States, nearly every state (including the District of Columbia) is charting its own distinct course toward creating a robust Pre-Kindergarten experience. However, the strategies for implementing UPK vary significantly, as each state grapples with its unique set of challenges and organizational structures, resulting in diverse approaches. This literature review delves into the funding origins of Rhode Island’s Pre-Kindergarten (RI-PK) program, which operates in a centralized manner, and it explores the proactive steps taken by Governor Raimondo to facilitate its expansion. Additionally, the review highlights concerns related to equitable access, particularly considering demographic shifts within the state.

States such as Oklahoma, Florida, New York, and New Jersey, all boast their own UPK policies and comprise an extensive body of scholarly literature. In stark contrast, Rhode Island lacks a single recent independent case study on UPK, with minimal publicly peer-reviewed research on the state of Pre-K education apart from official agency and consultant reports. However, local non-profits and advocacy groups such the “Right from the Start” campaign, Early Learning RI, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, United Way of RI, and the Rhode Island Foundation help to fill the gaps with their publications. The most noteworthy academic contributions from Rhode Island come from

Dr. Kenneth K. Wong, Professor at Brown University and Dr. Adrienne C. Goss, Founding Director of the Social Policy Hub for Equity Research in Education at Rhode Island College.

The progress made toward RI-UPK would not have materialized without dedicated sources of funding. Remarkably, prior to 2010, Rhode Island lagged behind as the last state in the country to implement a state school funding formula, as highlighted by Wong (2011). However, this late start provided Rhode Island with the advantage of being able to craft a formula using the best practices of the day. The resulting formula includes a yearly adjustment for inflation and a mechanism where resources follow the child. If a student leaves one school district, the aid automatically transfers to the receiving school.

One notable oversight in this new formula was its failure to allocate additional resources to special education students or English language learners, both of which represent ongoing challenges. Wong (2013) justifies this omission as a preventative measure against schools over-identifying these student groups. While suggesting their inclusion might have incentivized schools to game the system for more funding per student, the genuine need for additional resources for disadvantaged groups remains. Wong (2013) counters this argument by emphasizing that state aid to districts is based on the concentration of at-risk students and the median income of the community. This ensures that funding can still reach districts experiencing declining enrollment. To address gaps, categorical funding is utilized, although Goss (2020) cautions that this pool of money is unstable, and subject to potential revocation during annual appropriations. However, in 2017, Governor Raimondo took a significant step by making

categorical funding permanent for English Language Learners, laying the groundwork for subsequent funding formula changes (Goss, 2020). The Raimondo Administration swiftly recognized that education expansion policies, such as the 2016 implementation of full-day kindergarten and the 2017 campaign for 3rd-grade reading proficiency, must carefully consider equitable factors.

Another crucial takeaway from the funding formula process was Rhode Island's remarkable ability to address deficiencies even amidst a macro recessionary environment and looming deficits. Despite the challenges that will inevitably arise in the future, Rhode Island boasts a proven track record of implementing reforms even during difficult times. The absence of reform would have left federal funds untapped, exerting enormous pressure on legislators to take action. Wong (2013) underscores effective leadership, independent analysis, accountability, and transparency as pivotal elements in successful Rhode Island education reform.

While the desire to access federal funds naturally incentivizes change, Goss (2020) emphasizes that the state remains the primary influencer in education matters. The governorship plays a central role in education reform, as depicted in Figure 1. Although the Senate Committee on Education provides oversight by scrutinizing governor appointments to the board, and the General Assembly ultimately approves the annual education budget, the governor wields unique influence over the direction of education policy (Goss, 2020).

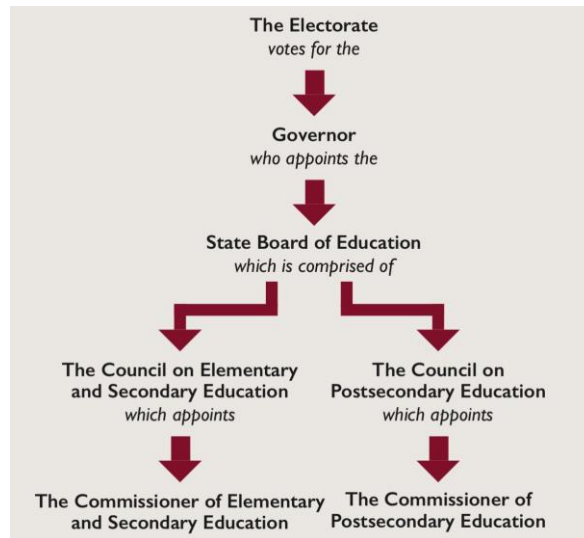


Figure 1 – Structure of RI State Education Agencies. By Adrienne Goss.

Notably, the governor possesses the authority to appoint all 50 members of the RI Early Learning Council. This Council, co-chaired by three members, includes appointments by recommendation of the Governor—specifically, the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Executive Director of the RI Department of Human Services (Goss, 2020). Additionally, the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education comprises eight Governor-appointed seats, including the Chair, who approves the Commissioner of Education responsible for overseeing the RI-PK program. Raimondo’s reconstitution of the Children’s Cabinet in 2015, which had been inactive since 2007, further underscores the governor’s commitment to education reform (Goss, 2020).

The challenge of UPK implementation goes beyond funding and structural considerations. It necessitates a holistic approach that takes into account dynamic shifts in demographics, geographical nuances, equity, and early intervention strategies for emergent bilingual learners (Goss, 2020). Providence County, a prime example of this

evolving landscape, grapples with significant changes. Approximately 42% of its under-5 population identifies as Hispanic or Latino according to the 2021 Census. Moreover, 81% of students enrolled in public schools across Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket are students of color, as reported by RI KIDS COUNT (2021). These figures underscore the urgency of addressing the unique needs of diverse learners.

RIDE acknowledges there's a critical gap— the absence of a tailored instructional approach for multilingual learners. Currently, there exists no specific curriculum to bridge this divide. This is a deficiency that poses a formidable challenge and is one that will only intensify as demographic shifts persist, which are impervious to change. Ignoring this issue is not an option; a solution must be found that ensures equitable access for all children.

Assimilation emerges as a potential remedy— one that fosters comfort and engagement for both parents and students within the educational system. However, Karoly (2011) highlights that immigrants often hesitate to enroll their children in preschool programs, with Latino families exhibiting lower participation rates. Overcoming cultural barriers and forging deeper connections is imperative. A society that fails to do so risks exacerbating isolation, which limits freedom and hurts unity.

Besharov (2008) presents a counter case of the UPK narrative, asserting that it is merely a manipulated concept. He cites NIEER data, revealing that 74% of 4-year-olds are already enrolled in existing programs and questions the need for the state to do more if families will find alternatives regardless. However, his argument relies heavily on generalizations. Bartik (2014), on the other hand, champions a well-designed UPK program. Putting forth the notion that such an initiative offers substantial societal benefits

by ensuring that all children grow up with the positive influence of peer pressure— as a gateway to excellence and fostering a deeper respect for authority. Furthermore, both low- and high-income families see benefits from high quality UPK as it is a difficult service to provide even for those who have the means to cover the associated costs when factoring transportation, time, and socialization (Bartik, 2014).

NIEER has been releasing annual reports since 2001 yet, the definition of UPK is often misconstrued, as Besharov (2008) points out, some states leverage UPK for its positive public perception rather than a complete offering. In 2020, 17 states claimed they had a UPK policy (Stanford, 2023) but there is a loose consensus around what those policies achieve. Steven Barnett, the founder of NIEER, defines UPK as a minimum 70% enrollment of eligible 4-year-olds (Stanford, 2023) but if that is the case then no state currently owns that title, and the closest is Florida with 68%. Yet, Florida’s UPK quality is abysmal, and NIEER gives them a benchmark low of 2/10. While Rhode Island hits 10/10 benchmarks and currently serves 21% of 4-year-olds, the 2022 report seems to prioritize access over quality as evidenced by the following quote:

“Finally, there are other states making progress enrolling more children in preschool without a legislative mandate to offer universal preschool but with an emphasis on quality. Alabama and Rhode Island are examples. These states have steadily increased enrollment of 4-year-olds in state-funded preschool with high standards, but both have a long way to go before reaching universal coverage.”

This highlights a double standard, where states that are moving towards 70% universal coverage are not necessarily doing so by hitting all benchmarks, and the top ten

states ranked for the most access for 4-year-olds all have below 10/10 quality and a third of them have below 5/10 quality (see table 1).

State	Access for 4-year-olds rank	Quality Standards Checklist Sum (Maximum 10)	Percentage of 4-Year-Olds Enrolled in State Pre-K (2021-2022)	Change in Pre-K Enrollment of 4-year-olds from 2019-2022	Shortage of qualified lead preschool teachers 2021-22?
Rhode Island	27	10/10	21%	+8%	No
Massachusetts	25	6/10	25%	-5%	Yes/unsure
Connecticut	32	5.1/10	18%	-3%	Yes
District of Colombia	1	4/10	83%	-1%	Unsure
Florida	2	2/10	68%	-3%	Not reported
Oklahoma	3	9/10	65%	-5%	Yes
Vermont	4	7/10	65%	-12%	Yes
Iowa	5	8/10	64%	-2%	Yes
West Virginia	6	9/10	63%	-5%	Unsure
Wisconsin	7	3/10	61%	-6%	Yes
Georgia	8	8/10	55%	-4%	Yes
New York	9	7/10	52%	+3%	No
Texas	10	4/10	47%	-4%	Not reported

Table 1 – NIEER data presented by André Herrera

The ideal goal of UPK should be multifaceted- a focus on sustainable growth with the highest standards possible that lifts all populations throughout the region with careful consideration given to how expansion might impact infant and special needs kids.

2.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The period under study spans from approximately 2010 to 2023, a critical time during which Rhode Island made significant strides in its state-funded Pre-K initiatives. Below are the key milestones:

1. Foundational Years (2010-2013):

- In 2010, RI concluded its first state-funded Pre-K school year, marking a pivotal moment. Simultaneously, NIEER began including RI in its data collection efforts.
- On June 10, 2010, the RI General Assembly implemented the first major school funding reform in nearly two decades, setting the stage for educational improvements.
- The same year witnessed the enactment of the RI Prekindergarten Education Act, laying the groundwork for Pre-K expansion.

2. Federal Support and Collaborations (2014-2016):

- In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education awarded RI a \$2.2 million Preschool Development Grant (PDG), bolstering Pre-K efforts.
- Governor Gina Raimondo's leadership was instrumental. In 2015, she reconvened the dormant Children's Cabinet in partnership with the General Assembly, fostering collaboration and renewed focus.
- The Dual Language Learner Screener Initiative was launched in 2015, emphasizing training and screening for local interpreters.

- The Workforce Registry, initiated the same year, collected crucial data on the early care and education workforce.

3. Transformation and Expansion (2016-2021):

- In 2016, RI secured a substantial \$19 million federal grant to expand its high-quality State Pre-Kindergarten Program. This infusion of resources catalyzed transformative changes.
- The grant facilitated workforce development, expanded the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), improved developmental screening, and fostered better interagency cooperation.
- Community engagement was prioritized, allowing more groups to provide valuable feedback on Pre-K programs.
- In 2018, the General Assembly requested a comprehensive Pre-K Expansion Plan for review, signaling a commitment to further growth.
- Governor Raimondo's 2019 announcement emphasized UPK as a top priority. The resulting "Road to Universal Pre-K" expansion plan outlined a phased approach toward achieving UPK initially by 2023.

4. Recent Developments (2021-2023):

- On March 2, 2021, Gina M. Raimondo resigned as governor to become the new Secretary of Commerce, leaving a significant impact on RI's education landscape.
- In 2022, the Rhode Island Department of Education, under Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green, submitted a Pre-K Expansion Plan aiming to reach 5,000 RI Pre-K seats by 2028.

- In 2023, Rhode Island's Pre-K program celebrated its 15th year, providing free, high-quality Pre-K education to more than 2,300 4-year-olds across 18 communities. This achievement was made possible through a mixed-delivery model, which included Head Start programs, local schools, and community-based childcare providers.

Rhode Island's remarkable journey from small initial Pre-K offerings to a robust and strategic system involved collaboration, federal support, and a vision for accessible and effective early education.

3.0 CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

This investigation employs a mixed-methods approach, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data sources. Quantitative techniques are utilized to compare PK implementation data (provided by NIEER) across different states. Notably, this study leans heavily on NIEER data due to its particular emphasis on cost-benefit ratios, which closely align with NIEER standards as highlighted by Bartik (2014). Through statistical analysis, the study examines multiple cases to identify patterns and subtle variations in approach. Factor analysis is employed to isolate relevant variables and present diverse approaches in tabular form. Additionally, data visualizations, including percentages and scattergrams, illustrate correlations.

The primary focus of this study is to document the evolution of the Rhode Island Pre-Kindergarten (RI-PK) program and compare it with the implementation processes of various state models at a macro level. The combination of longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses enriches the depth of these findings. This research draws from multiple sources, including ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Scopus (a bibliographic database of scholarly literature), JSTOR, Ocean State Libraries, books, news articles, implementation reports, and state legislation. Furthermore, insights for this case study are supplemented by interviews with early childhood administrators and elected officials.

Given the small N (number of cases) in this study, I intentionally focus on comparing the approaches of a carefully curated selection of states. These selections are justified either by geographical proximity or noteworthy relevance. For instance, New York stands out as a top contender for comparison due to the fact that its Former Deputy Commissioner of Education, Angélica Infante-Green, was subsequently appointed by Gina Raimondo to serve as the Rhode Island Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2019.

3.1 LIMITATIONS

While this thesis provides valuable insights into state pre-school offerings, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations:

1. Nuances and Intricacies: The study does not delve excessively into the nuances of each state's pre-school plans. Given the complexity of the landscape, a comprehensive exploration of every state's intricacy would be overwhelming and challenging for readers to digest.
2. Macro View with NIEER: The research contends that the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) offers the most comprehensive macro view of state pre-school programs across the country. This broad perspective is adequate for the purpose of comparison and analysis. By meticulously extrapolating pertinent information from years of the *State of Pre-School* reports, the study establishes NIEER's data as a robust foundation. Furthermore, RIDE (2022)

signaled in their report that any Pre-K expansion will be in-line with NIEER standards, which seems to further justify this decision.

3. **Lack of Clear Consensus:** While NIEER's data is strong, it is essential to recognize that some of their opinions lack a clear consensus. Researchers should approach these viewpoints with critical analysis and consider alternative perspectives.
4. **Exclusion of QRIS and BrightStars:** Notably, this study does not factor in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) or BrightStars, both of which are widely used to evaluate early childhood programs. These systems provide valuable insights into program quality and effectiveness. However, their inclusion would further complicate the study, as this information is already accessible through the RI KidsCount yearly fact-book.
5. **Emphasis on Cost-Benefit Ratios:** The study also leans heavily on NIEER data due to its particular emphasis on cost-benefit ratios. This focus aligns with the principles highlighted by Bartik (2014) and underscores the importance of state fiscal responsibility in pre-school program design and implementation.

While this research provides a robust overview of state pre-school offerings, readers should be aware of these limitations and consider them in the context of their own analyses and policy discussions.

4.0 CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS AND DATA

Rhode Island’s neighbors, Massachusetts and Connecticut have public school systems that are ranked first and second in the country respectively according to WalletHub (2023). Yet, WalletHub ranks MA and CT 49th and 9th in terms of Early Education Systems. Whereas RI ranks 7th in the nation for early childhood education but 26th for public schools (the lowest rank regionally). This is an unresolved dichotomy, on one hand Rhode Island is a national leader in early childhood education by NIEER standards, and on the other hand, Rhode Island lags behind its peers in K-12 education.

The case study “The State of Preschool in a Mixed Delivery System (2023)” argues that a harmonious relationship between decentralized Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and centralized non-Local Education Agencies is essential for effective Pre-K policy implementation. This dynamic is particularly advantageous in Rhode Island, which boasts a mixed delivery model featuring 66 public LEAs as of 2019, complemented by the overarching authority of the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) overseeing the Pre-K program. Garver et al. (2023) further highlight Alabama’s centralized approach to its PK program, emphasizing “the highest level of state involvement” during the grant application phase within their mixed delivery framework. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Rhode Island and Alabama stand out as the only two states in the nation to

consistently achieve a perfect 10/10 rating in the NIEER benchmarks for 13 consecutive years, as depicted in Table 2.

Year	# of states meeting 10/10 benchmarks	States meeting 10/10 benchmarks
2010	4	Alabama, Alaska, North Carolina, Rhode Island
2011	5	Alabama, Alaska, North Carolina, Rhode Island , Georgia
2012	4	Alabama, Alaska, North Carolina, Rhode Island
2013	4	Alabama, Alaska, North Carolina, Rhode Island
2014	4	Alabama, Alaska, North Carolina, Rhode Island
2015	5	Alabama, Alaska, North Carolina, Rhode Island , Mississippi
2016	2	Alabama, Rhode Island (standards were revised & now more strict)
2017	3	Alabama, Michigan, Rhode Island
2018	3	Alabama, Michigan, Rhode Island
2019	4	Alabama, Michigan, Rhode Island , Mississippi
2020	5	Alabama, Michigan, Rhode Island , Mississippi, Hawaii
2021	4	Alabama, Michigan, Rhode Island , Mississippi
2022	5	Alabama, Michigan, Rhode Island , Mississippi, Hawaii

Table 2 – NIEER data (2010-2022) presented by André Herrera

Due to the alignment of several factors outlined by Cohen-Vogel et al. (2022), Rhode Island is in the position to spearhead a UPK initiative. The study contends that states with low unemployment rates, one-party dominance in the legislature, competition from neighboring states, and high spending per pupil are more likely to expand Pre-Kindergarten programs. Rhode Island satisfies this criterion, and the broader region has also witnessed an expansion of UPK initiatives in neighboring states such as Vermont, New York, and New Jersey.

States are in constant competition, and to be recognized as a leader in a particular area is noteworthy. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) releases an annual report on the state of Preschool that ranks and tracks state-funded Pre-K efforts. States looking to improve their programs consider the recommendations put forth by the annual report and adjust accordingly. For example, Connecticut does not currently meet NIEER's teacher degree benchmark, which requires a Bachelor of Arts (BA), however their most recent staff guidelines for 2022 outlines their plan to phase in that

requirement by 2029 for all Early Childhood Educators (ECE). In 2022, Connecticut served 18% of four-year-olds in their Pre-K program vs Rhode Island's 21%, with the overall quality of their program being half (5.1/10) as good as Rhode Island (10/10) by NIEER standards despite being the 7th highest spender in the country, while Rhode Island is only 18th in spending. Comparison breeds competition, and the evidence indicates that Rhode Island competes at the highest level and merits closer attention from all education policy advocates. Rhode Island's remarkable feat of maintaining a perfect score according to NIEER standards for thirteen consecutive years is unmatched, except by Alabama. It's worth noting that Alabama, despite having five times the population and ten times the budget allocated for state Pre-K programs compared to Rhode Island, stands as the only other state to achieve this exceptional level of success. Table 3 depicts a small sample size for the sake of comparison.

	NIEER Benchmarks Rating out of 10						
Year	Rhode Island	Massachusetts	Connecticut	New York	Vermont	New Jersey	Hawaii
2010	10	6	6	6	4	8.8	No Program
2011	10	6	6	7	4	8.8	No Program
2012	10	6	6	7	4	8.8	No Program
2013	10	6	6	8.8	4	8.8	No Program
2014	10	6	6	7	4	8.8	No Program
2015	10	6	6	7	4	8.8	9
2016	10	6.6	4.8	7	5	8.8	7
2017	10	6.3	4.9	7	5	7.8	7
2018	10	6.2	5	7	7	8	7
2019	10	5.2	5	7	7	8	8
2020	10	5	5	7	7	8	10
2021	10	5.5	5.1	7	7	8	9.6
2022	10	6	5.1	7	7	8	10

Table 3 - NIEER data (2010-2022) presented by André Herrera

Since RI did not have a state funded Pre-K program before 2010, it can be considered a relative newcomer to the space. However, sometimes being late to the party has its advantages, and this allowed the PK program to be developed using the best practices of the day. States like New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts

had established state funded programs years before Rhode Island. The disadvantages to being early is that their programs had growing pains. Massachusetts launched UPK in 2005 but served less children in 2011 than they did in 2002 (NIEER, 2011). However, setting UPK as a goal, even without funding is a technique that Massachusetts and Florida used to try and accelerate its existence (PDK, 2005). Finally, after almost 20 years from that announcement, MA now serves 25% of 4-year-olds, with RI close to catching up with its neighbor in just 7 years, serving 21% (see table 4). Rhode Island should be proud of the great strides it has made, but it will need strong leadership to keep this momentum. Speaker of the House Joseph Shekarchi expressed interest in taking up the cause by adding an additional \$7 million in the budget for early childhood education programs (Towne, 2023). Furthermore, Governor Dan McKee and Senate President Ruggerio back the plan for UPK expansion to 5,000 seats by 2028, which is approximately a 50% increase from the current enrollment. However, looming budget pitfalls can quickly pour cold water on these efforts. Still, as Wong (2013) points out, RI has made significant education reform during times of crisis and tight fiscal conditions.

When stacked against the competition, and accounting for the variables, RI's achievements in Early Childhood Education are impressive. The District of Colombia is the highest Pre-K spender in the country and the most densely populated, serving 83% of 4-year-olds, but only hits 4/10 of NIEER quality benchmarks. Ideally, the goal of UPK is to serve as many Pre-K students as possible, while also maintaining consistent quality. However, many states serve a high percentage of children yet only offer a few class hours per day, for example, New Jersey and New York have a 2.5-hour minimum Pre-K operational requirement (NIEER, 2023). Furthermore, some states have large class sizes

that are well over the recommended teacher/student ratio, for example, Virginia has a max class size of 30 students, with California and Washington having no limit (NIEER, 2023).

Rhode Island has been thorough in aligning its expansion efforts with NIEER standards, as evidenced by the data indicating a steady increase in capacity over the past few years. Initially, the progress was gradual, but it has since accelerated significantly.

Table 4 visually illustrates this trend with a small sample set.

	Percentage of 4-Year Olds Enrolled in State Funded Pre-School							
Year	Rhode Island	Massachusetts	Connecticut	New York	Vermont	New Jersey	Hawaii	Alabama
2012	1%	14%	13%	44.2%	49%	28%	0%	6%
2016	5%	8%	24%	49.9%	67%	29%	2%	19%
2020	13%	30%	21%	48.1%	76%	32%	3.9%	34%
2021	16%	34%	15%	45.8%	57%	29%	2.2%	31%
2022	21%	25%	18%	51.1%	65%	29%	2.8%	36%

Table 4 - NIEER data (2010-2022) presented by André Herrera

The data demonstrates Rhode Island's incremental but consistent progress in expanding Pre-K services while also maintaining high-quality programming standards.

Based on current trends, Rhode Island is projected to achieve a comprehensive implementation of UPK by 2028, joining a select group of states that offer both widespread access and top-notch Pre-K programs (RIDE, 2022).

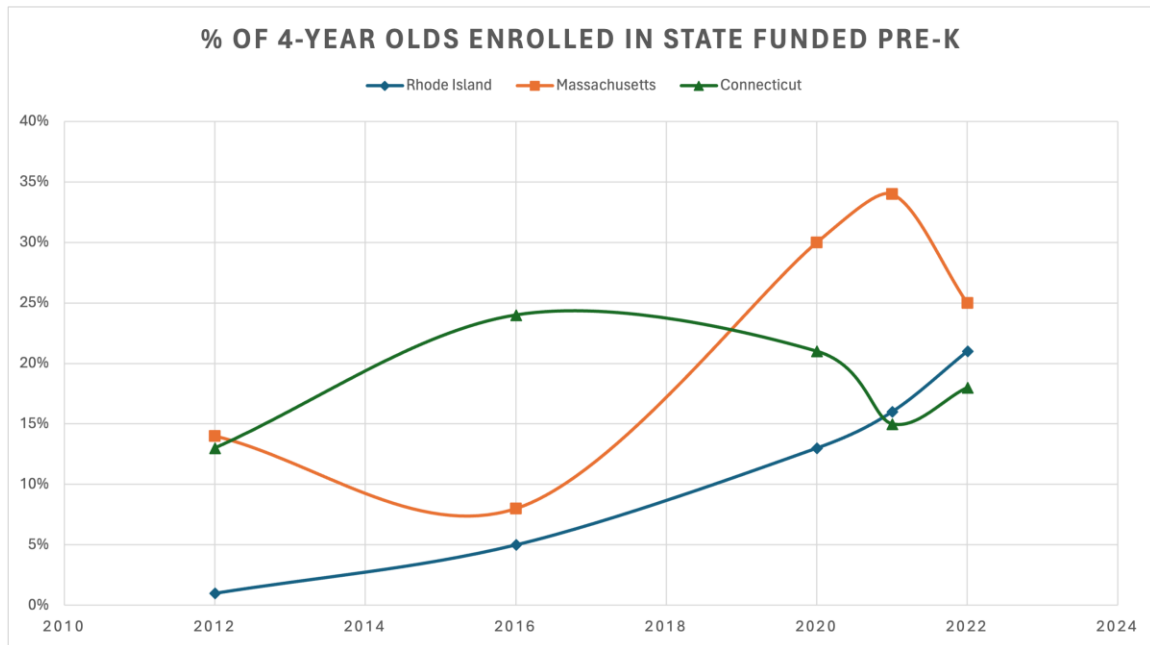


Figure 2- NIEER data (2010-2022) presented by André Herrera

4.1.1 RI UPK Challenges

While RI UPK is in a much better spot than it ever has been, it's not a completely rosy picture either. The road to 40% statewide access is going to be more difficult than the journey to the first 20%. The reality is more complicated than the numbers suggest. RI will find it difficult to retain its 10/10 quality while also expanding its offerings in a cost-effective way. One significant barrier lies in the stringent qualifications mandated for Pre-K teachers by Rhode Island State Law, as outlined in RI General Laws Chapter 16-48 and 16-87. These regulations establish specific requirements for staff qualifications, creating a hurdle for experienced assistant teachers seeking to earn a sustainable income. Additionally, state legislators are hesitant to consider lowering qualification standards, even if it could facilitate faster expansion and reduce costs, given

the importance placed on maintaining high-quality standards in early childhood programs.

Early intervention specialists require a master's degree, which is also difficult to obtain and excludes many candidates. In neighboring states such as CT and MA, an experienced assistant can earn full-time wages that compete with RI offerings. While Connecticut has more lenient requirements, they plan to begin phasing in qualifications through 2022-2029 to meet NIEER benchmarks. It appears many states are going in opposite directions on this issue, as it is difficult to balance access, cost, and quality.

Another constraint is the number of facilities available. RI's dense population is a constraint on space and while there are enough spaces for UPK classrooms, the distribution of those spaces is not equitable. Wealthier school districts disproportionately have more space to expand UPK than poorer districts and supporting more children in poverty should be part of the goal of expansion. Having a highly centralized structure of RI-UPK, with power concentrated in the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) can also be seen as a constraint. To many outside observers, RIDE lacks sufficient oversight and has near total control over the RI Pre-K system. Any type of Pre-K expansion also means expanding and strengthening RIDE. In terms of diversity, RI has additional considerations that a state like Vermont doesn't factor due to their demographic composition. Vermont has UPK but cannot be a model for the country if they face none of the diversity challenges in regards to bilingual learners. RIDE (2022) notes that as high as 18% of current RI Pre-K students have been identified as multi-language learners.

5.0 CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

Geographic Targeting:

An important component to the RI UPK puzzle is ensuring that its expansion provides equitable access. As a microcosm of National demographic trends, RI must tackle this reality head on. New Jersey already uses geographic targeting in order to facilitate equitable access to underserved communities (Karoly, 2011), therefore, Rhode Island would do well to adopt a similar policy. Exceptions to school district boundaries should also be made based on geographic proximity and transportation needs perhaps through a phased in approach over several years or on a committee case-by-case basis.

Rebranding to UHQPK or Similar:

UPK over the years embodies a dynamic standard that incorporates various measurements. Therefore, the concept should be rebranded and revisited by either the current or future administration as Universal High-Quality Pre-Kindergarten (UHQPK). This focuses on states working towards universal Pre-K (70% access) while maintaining the highest quality (10/10) benchmarks. Rhode Island is an example of incremental

progress towards the UHQPK standard, and if the next five years are similar to the last, it is on track to exceed neighboring states and will even rival those ranked at the top.

Outreach and Coverage:

More news coverage about RI's exceptional UPK needs to reach the public. Rhode Island has a UPK bright spot, and by focusing on the states successes it will prompt reform in other areas.

Realistic Leadership:

Champions at the state level are required to achieve the goal of RI-UPK. However, it is important to recognize that these efforts should be prioritized through cost-benefit analysis. The educational needs of the state extend well beyond Pre-K and towards other grade levels – in other words, resources are limited. Bartik (2014) contends that UPK for 4-year-olds is still the greatest return on investment but expansion to 3-year-olds does not result in double benefits. However, as RIDE (2022) explains, a sole focus on 4-year-olds inadvertently leeches' resources away from toddler care. Therefore, a balanced approach is required, where ages 0-5 are supported holistically in any expansion plan.

5.2 CONCLUSION

The timing is ripe for Rhode Island to assume a prominent role in the ongoing UPK debate, as underscored by scholarly literature on the topic. While the extent of Rhode Island's Pre-K expansion remains contingent on federal funds, the state's growing reputation in this sector positions it well for securing substantial national grants.

Analyzing the data reveals that Rhode Island has the capacity to catch up with its peers swiftly, especially under favorable conditions. With strong leadership and the strategic use of its centralized authority, RI possesses the essential elements for rapid policy implementation. Additionally, its geographic advantages—facilitating efficient mobilization and communication within its dense population—further contribute to its potential success. However, this dual-edged sword cuts both ways. While progress can be swift, the consequences of consistently poor decisions are equally pronounced. Rhode Island serves as a microcosm of the entire country, making it a state to watch for both positive and negative reasons. The underlying volatility attached to all policy outcomes underscores the need for cautious optimism.

Overcoming public hesitancy requires unwavering commitment. Rhode Island must continue to seek leaders who share Governor Raimondo's passion for Pre-K issues and persistently drive progress. By doing so, the state can forge ahead, ensuring that quality early education remains a priority for generations to come.

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