



PERSONAL SUPPORT BUILT ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE



2023 Policy Forum

Issue Brief:

Ensuring Access to Preschool Special Education

Introduction

This spring, news emerged that dozens of three-year-olds with disabilities in Providence were waiting for services, some for as long as several months.¹ While the situation in Providence was widely reported in the media, we at RIPIN know firsthand that Providence is far from alone. Many districts around Rhode Island (indeed, around the country) are struggling to meet the needs of preschool age children with disabilities. These gaps in services can have significant long-term consequences for individuals, families, and schools. Receiving services early and continuously helps children with disabilities catch up to their peers, reduces the need for services later, and increases their chances of success in K-12 education and beyond.^{2 3}

In this issue brief, we hope to raise awareness about the challenges faced by Rhode Island's Preschool Special Education system, and to explore some opportunities to improve the support we provide to children at this critical time in their development.

From Early Intervention to Preschool Special Education: A Growing Crisis

Access challenges in Rhode Island's Early Intervention system (birth to age three) are now well-documented, and the state recently invested heavily in response. In 2022, the Governor and General Assembly allocated \$5.5 million in federal ARPA funds to help stabilize the Early Intervention system. That same year, advocates pushed for and won a 45% reimbursement rate increase for Early Intervention

services, the first such rate increase in twenty years. For children aged 3-5 eligible for Preschool Special Education services, however, the access challenges are receiving comparatively little attention even as those challenges are growing.

Beyond the situation in Providence—where, as of mid-May 2023, more than 100 preschool students with finalized Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) were on a waiting list and over 700 more referrals were pending⁴—RIPIN is seeing more and more three-year-olds with disabilities across

Early Intervention vs. Preschool Special Education

Under the IDEA — the federal law that governs special education and related services — children with disabilities under age five are served by two separate but related systems of support.

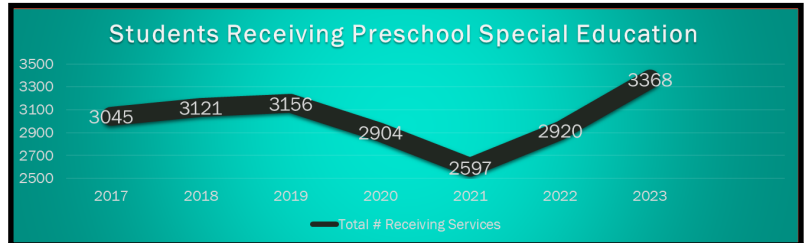
IDEA Part C governs **Early Intervention (EI)**, which provides for services for children with developmental delays from birth to age three. The specifics of EI programs vary from state to state. In Rhode Island, EI is administered by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services.

IDEA Part B relates to school-aged children, including **Preschool Special Education**, and provides for services for children beginning at their third birthday and continuing into K-12, up to their 22nd birthday. These services and special instruction are provided by the school district where the child resides.

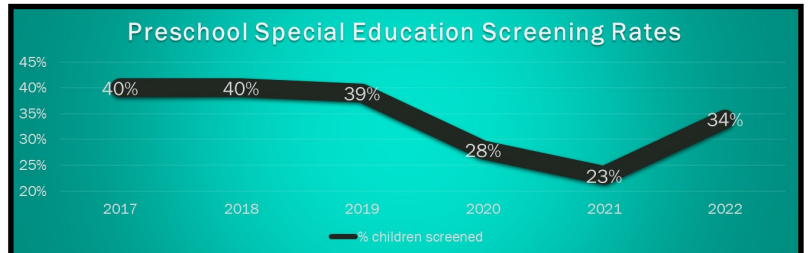
Rhode Island waiting for appropriate services for a variety of reasons. There are more late referrals to Early Intervention making transitions more difficult. Even transitions for established Early Intervention families are more frequently delayed. Evaluations are taking longer to secure, and then services are delayed due to workforce shortages. Part-time Preschool Special Education programs offered by many school districts do not meet the needs of all families. Insufficient capacity at Head Start programs makes it harder to get placements.

Special education administrators from at least eight districts told RIPIN in September that they are seeing a greater number of students with special education needs relative to pre-Covid years while also reporting less capacity in terms of both staffing and space to meet those students' needs. Special education administrators have also shared that the needs of individual students are increasing, with some theorizing that delayed intervention caused by recent gaps in the Early Intervention system is a key contributor.

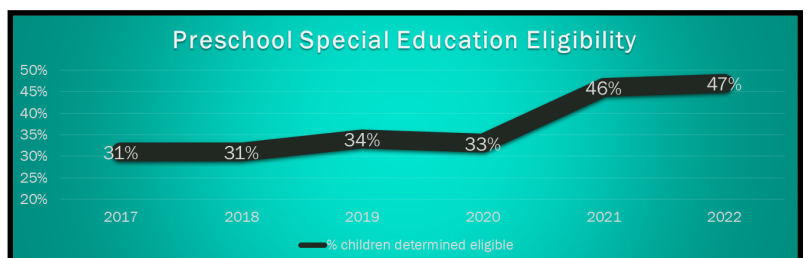
Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education systems have long had trouble securing enough qualified personnel, classroom space, and resources to meet the needs of all students with disabilities. Like many other systemic issues in public education, the



As of June 2023, the total number of students receiving preschool special education exceeded pre-pandemic levels. *Data Source: RIDE, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT*



Preschool special education screening rates were still below pre-pandemic levels as of June 2022. *Data Source: RIDE, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT*



Of children who are screened, eligibility rates are trending up. *Data Source: RIDE, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT*

“The social emotional needs of preschoolers has increased dramatically since 2020.”

- Rhode Island Special Education Administrator

Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated and made more visible the challenges in Preschool Special Education. While students of all abilities and across all grade levels faced developmental and academic setbacks, very young students with disabilities and the systems designed to serve them have been disproportionately impacted; children of color with disabilities have experienced the most negative impacts.^{5 6}

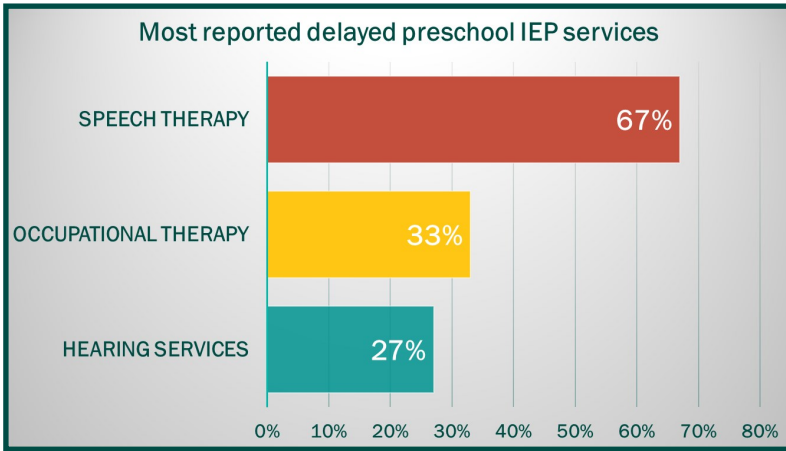
What the Data Show

The number of children receiving Preschool Special Education is primarily driven by how many children are

screened, and the proportion of screened children who are found eligible. The percentage of Rhode Island students screened for Preschool Special Education hit a pandemic era low of 23% in 2021. The screening rate increased to 34% in June 2022 but remains below the pre-pandemic rate of around 40%, and screening rates in Core Cities (Providence, Pawtucket, Woonsocket and Central Falls) continue to lag behind the statewide average. The number of students receiving Preschool Special Education services

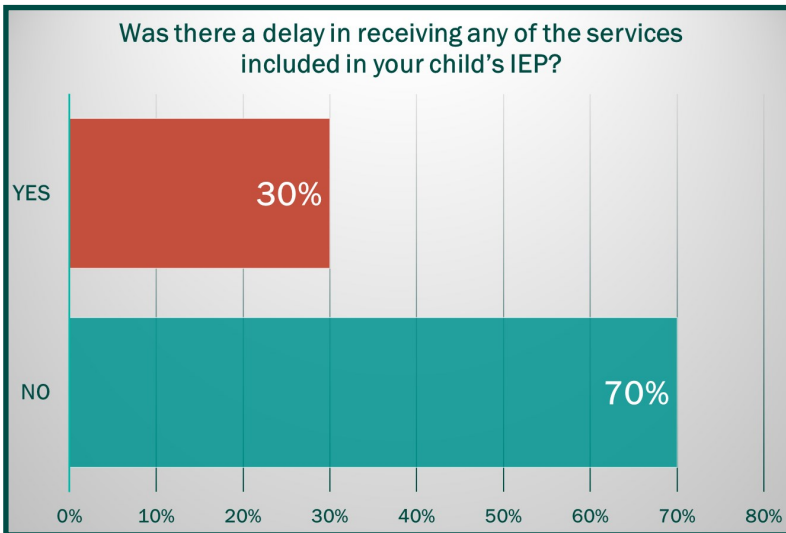
More than one fourth of parents surveyed reported not receiving all of the services in their child’s IEP.

About one third of parents reported a delay in receiving at least one service.



services in their child’s IEP that they did *not* receive, the top service reported as being missed was speech therapy, followed by special instruction. About one third of parents reported a delay in receiving at least one service; again, the service most frequently delayed was speech therapy. For both services that were not received and services that were delayed, the most frequently reported reason was staffing shortages.

Our survey was small (with about 100 respondents), informal, and taken from a nonrandom population of respondents who were all RIPIN clients and therefore had a little extra support. While widespread conclusions should not be drawn from these results, they do offer some insight



Preschool Special Education Service Delivery

Preschoolers may receive early childhood special education services in various settings to meet their individual needs.

- **Inclusive preschool classrooms** integrate children with disabilities and their typically-developing peers and are supported by special education professionals alongside general education teachers. Such inclusive settings have been shown to improve outcomes for children with disabilities.
- Some preschoolers with more significant disabilities may be placed in **self-contained classrooms**. These are smaller, specialized classrooms with lower student-to-teacher ratios, ensuring more individualized attention and tailored instruction.
- Children may attend **community-based preschools** that offer special education services, funded by the child’s LEA, through the Rhode Island Itinerant Early Childhood Special Education (RI-IECSE) Service Delivery Model.
- Some preschoolers receive **“walk-in”** special education services like speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, or physical therapy.

Under the IDEA and guidance from the US Department of Education, special education and related services are to always be provided in the **least restrictive environment** that allows students with disabilities to receive appropriate support and services while maximizing their inclusion in general education classrooms and activities to the greatest extent possible.

The most frequently reported reason that services were not received or were delayed was staffing shortages.

has increased nearly 30% since 2021 (from 2,597 to 3,368), and now exceeds the pre-COVID baseline.^{7 8}

2023 RIPIN Parent Survey

In August, RIPIN surveyed our clients who are parents of children currently enrolled in Early Intervention or Preschool Special Education, or who had been enrolled in either in the last four years. Responses came from a variety of Rhode Island communities.

While a majority (74%) of respondents whose children were enrolled in Preschool Special Education said their child received all of the services identified in their child’s IEP, 26% of respondents concerningly report their child did not receive all services. Among the parents who said there were

into the experiences of Rhode Island parents in recent years.

Potential Solutions

While the current situation is challenging, there are many opportunities worth exploring that could improve Preschool Special Education.

For example, other states have taken action to address their shortage of special education teachers. Hawaii began offering special education teachers \$10,000 more than general education teachers in 2020, cutting the state's special educator shortage in half within one year.⁹ Indiana has created the Indiana Special Education Assisted Licensure (I-SEAL) and Aspiring Statewide Special Education Teacher (ASSET) programs as alternative pathways to special education licensure. The programs allow educators to meet licensure requirements over a determined period while working in classrooms, gaining

experience and training specific to special education.¹⁰ Tennessee has the first federally recognized registered teacher apprenticeship program, using state and federal workforce funds to provide a no-cost pathway for teacher candidates.¹¹

A December 2022 report from RIDE, DHS, and the RI Children's Cabinet on Pre-K expansion makes a series of Rhode Island-specific recommendations, including exploring new rules to allow children to receive Preschool Special Education services outside of the geographic boundaries of their home school district, amending the funding formula to include children receiving services through the RI-IECSE (itinerant) model, and extending Early Intervention beyond a child's third birthday to allow transitions in September when school-based programs typically start.¹²

Identifying Grassroots Collaborative Solutions

Rhode Island must address the emerging crisis in access to Preschool Special Education. In identifying solutions, it will be necessary to pursue strategies both long-term and short-term. In the long term, there is clearly need for attention and resources dedicated to building the workforce. Potential changes to funding models may also be merited and may have more medium-term impact. In the short term, there are ways that we can remove barriers and support collaboration between schools, districts, and Early Intervention providers.

The good news is that there are many opportunities to examine models from other states and to amplify best practices already happening within Rhode Island. The strongest solutions will be those that are developed collaboratively and that center the needs of children and their families.

RIPIN is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that serves families using a peer professional support model. A majority of our board and more than three-fourths of our staff are caregivers of a loved one with special education or special health care needs. Our team of experts combine their lived experiences with high-quality training and professional development to help families across Rhode Island access and navigate special education, healthcare and health insurance, and services and supports for individuals with disabilities and their families. Since 1991, RIPIN has served as the federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTIC) for special education for Rhode Island. Learn more at www.RIPIN.org.

References

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⁹ Hawkins, Beth. "Yes, There's a Shortage of Special Education Teachers. And That's Nothing New." The 74, 15 Sept. 2022, www.the74million.org/article/yes-theres-a-shortage-of-special-education-teachers-and-thats-nothing-new/.

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¹² RI Children's Cabinet, et al. Report and Recommendations on RI Pre-K Expansion. 30 Dec. 2022.