

Region 1 Episode

Guests: Kayla Rosen and Lisa Nugent

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners hoping to use research to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities. Today, we continue our regional story series, looking at the innovative work being done in states and communities across the country with support from the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five initiative. Host Mary Klute takes us to Rhode Island, where unique approaches to early childhood funding are being used to expand access to high-quality preschool programs. That's right now on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Mary Klute:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Mary Klute, principal education researcher with SRI Education. Today, I am excited to be joined by two incredible early childhood leaders from Rhode Island. First, we have Kayla Rosen, director of Early Childhood Strategy with the state governor's office. Welcome Kayla.

Kayla Rosen:

Hi.

Mary Klute:

Next, we have Lisa Nugent, coordinator of Early Learning with the Rhode Island Department of Education. Thanks so much for joining us, Lisa.

Lisa Nugent:

Hey Mary. So happy to be here.

Mary Klute:

All right. So let's talk a little bit about Rhode Island's work related to pre-K. What are Rhode Island's goals for expanding access to pre-K in the state?

Kayla Rosen:

Mary, thanks so much again for having us. Rhode Island is really committed to reaching universally accessible pre-K. When we say that, we mean a seat for any kid who wants it in a high quality, full day, full school year program that is free to families. Our goal has been 7,000 seats for four-year-olds because we have about 10,000 kids per age cohort in Rhode Island. We're very small. That has been our goal. But recently there's been a push to really think about three-year-olds as well. We're really excited to be thinking about that in the coming year and years.

Mary Klute:

Great. What a wonderful benefit for families that will be when you reach that goal. What are some of the challenges that you've encountered while working toward those goals?

Lisa Nugent:

I would say when I came to RIDE probably about six years ago now, we only had one model which was, we would fully fund a classroom. In listening to a lot of our stakeholders and especially our small business holders, we really found out that there was a facilities issue. There wasn't a lot of space that was available for one full classroom to be dropped into. We also found that children who had been with a center or with a Head Start program from birth on really wanted to stay in that program where they were more comfortable with the teachers, it worked for their commute for their family life. Unfortunately we were putting them in a lottery and then they would get a school on the other side of town. We heard from a lot of our small business owners that that was an issue.

Lisa Nugent:

We also listened to our Head Start partners. They've been great partners throughout this entire expansion. One of the things they really talked about was we have a very diverse socioeconomic mix in our classrooms. This is not a program only for low income children. It is for any child who is four by September 1 of that given year. They said it was almost like we had underprivileged on one side and over-privileged on the other side of the same corridor and why aren't we all in these classrooms together? And so, we really put our heads together to try to find out how do we address those concerns of not enough empty classrooms, making sure family had choice in where they were going to school when we were starting to rebuild out what universal pre-K would look like.

Mary Klute:

That's really valuable feedback. How did the PDG B-5 grant enable you to address those challenges?

Kayla Rosen:

PDG B-5 has been extremely helpful in helping us to expand in a couple of different ways. First is before PDG B-5, I think we had just over 1,000 pre-K seats. We said 7,000 was the goal. With PDG, we've been able to expand to 2,300 seats. I think it's more like 1,400 seats to 2,300 seats that we've been able to expand. That has been huge, because that is a huge jump in terms of the number of seats, the number of families that we could serve and the number of kiddos who could have this incredible high-quality early learning experience in the midst of the pandemic that we were able to expand. First PDG has allowed us to expand.

Kayla Rosen:

Second, we were able to expand so much because we are developing new funding and service delivery models that addressed the challenges that Lisa just talked about. It was through the PDG process of collaborating across agencies, helping us develop a new governance structure, a new work stream to bring our different agencies together to think through new funding models that allowed us to create new ideas and actually implement them together. Without the grant kind of pushing us to collaborate and giving us the space to think more creatively around how we bring different funding streams together, we never would've been able to expand as cost effectively as rapidly, and frankly, as creatively, as we did.

Mary Klute:

Can you talk about the different funding streams that you braided together to fund pre-K?

Kayla Rosen:

There are a lot of different fund streams we've been braiding. Foundationally, we use our pre-K categorical funds at the Rhode Island Department of Education that fund the program. With these new models, we've been able to braid and blend with Head Start funds, with child care assistance program, and with stimulus funds, including the governor's emergency education relief fund, as well as our PDG B-5 funds. Those together have been able to grow our program, and in the last two years, by using these new funding models, the cost to the state categorical fund is lower by being able to braid in the Head Start, or the CCAP funds. Again, a high-quality classroom cost what it cost to do high quality, but the question of which fund streams are coming in allows us to really maximize and optimize the fund streams that we have available to reach as many kids as possible each year.

Mary Klute:

That's great. Can you tell me a little bit more about some of these new funding models that you created?

Lisa Nugent:

Sure. So they were pretty unique. We really wanted to celebrate what we already had in the early childhood landscape and to recognize where we already had high-quality programs. RI pre-K was lucky enough to really come into light after the NIEER [[the National Institute for Early Education Research](#)] benchmarks had been put out. We built our program around making sure that we hit all 10 of those NIEER benchmarks.

Lisa Nugent:

We also did a lot of mirroring of our Head Starts. We know that the Head Starts in Rhode Island are all high-quality programs, and we wanted to make sure that we mirrored that.

Lisa Nugent:

So what we decided to do, and we really started it with Head Start and then kind of went into the community-based organizations, was to say, "Okay, you've got a Head Start classroom and you are servicing 15 below-income children. Let us pay almost like a private tuition on top of that to allow children above income, especially those families who fall between 135% and 185% of poverty that don't necessarily qualify for Head Start but whose families really struggle in finding appropriate child care and education programs.

Lisa Nugent:

We started braiding our funding together. Head Start would take care of the Head Start children with their federal dollars. The RI pre-K dollars would come in on top of that. That got us thinking that there's got to be a way to do that also in our community-based centers.

Lisa Nugent:

So we took kind of that pilot and that idea and brought it over to the community-based centers and said, "If a child is already getting a subsidy voucher for CCAP," which is our voucher system in Rhode Island to subsidize child care, "We don't want to take that child and move them into a different pre-K and take that money away from a small business owner." What we rather do is layer quality funding on top of what they were already getting, which helps us raise the pay of our teachers, because we do expect a

bachelor degree teacher in every classroom, allowed more flexibility in parents deciding for family choice, where they wanted to send their child. They could stay at their same school. It waived copays for families through that period, so really helped them out financially, especially during this pandemic, and now endemic that we are experiencing.

Lisa Nugent:

We had a lot of small business owners who were losing enrollment and they had five seats available. Rather than try to run a classroom with their two teachers and under enrolled, RI pre-K was able to say through the lottery, "Hey, we'll give you those extra five children and we'll pay for them with the RI pre-K and the PDG funding dollars," which really allowed for a lot of good faith in the community. There are times when people hear we're going to universal. You're going to run out small businesses, or you're going to take away from the federal Head Start grant. Our goal is truly to support both of those as we build towards those 7,000 seats that we're hoping to get to.

Lisa Nugent:

My partner, Nicole, who serves on the DHS side is also committed to quality. We collaborate and have weekly meetings where we are talking through some of the challenges, what are the successes that we're seeing? How do we keep all of our money and really stay as a cohesive unit so that RI pre-K is something that isn't pushing anyone else out? It is bringing everybody together. We actually did two Head Start models, one similar to the community-base, but Head Start for some of our schools was 170 days instead of 180 days. We paid for those 10 extra days with our PDG money, which allowed those children to have a full year education.

Mary Klute:

Have you encountered any challenges with this work?

Lisa Nugent:

So we thought we were brilliant and we solved everything, and this was going to be great and we were going to go forward. We did find some challenges as we were going forward. For example, we really do a lottery system because we don't have enough seats for all of the children. To be fair, we really put everyone through this lottery system. It's actually closing on July 6, then we'll be pulling all of our applicants.

Lisa Nugent:

But in some classrooms, they were already full with maybe matriculating students or Head Start students. We were advertising a lottery in a spot that maybe we weren't going to be able to give away seats. We fixed that for this year.

Lisa Nugent:

I think the other bigger challenge in our community-based centers was you qualify for CCAP, which you qualify for a year, but if that happened in January of the year prior, you might lose your CCAP funding in January. We had to make sure that we compensated and had enough funding to then let that child continue with their enrollment.

Mary Klute:

What are your plans for sustaining this work after the PDG B-5 grant ends?

Kayla Rosen:

That's a great question. I think sustainability is something that we think about all the time and I'm sure other state partners do as well. Our FY 23 budget started today, and there's some really exciting investments that are going to set us up well for continued expansion in pre-K. For example, we just invested in doubling the number of TEACH scholarships that we can support for the next couple years so more early educators will have the opportunity to go and attain higher degrees in credentials, which will allow them to potentially teach in pre-K classrooms, because the number of qualified workforce is certainly something that could be a barrier to expansion and to sustainability. That's a really key investment for expanding pre-K.

Kayla Rosen:

About a year ago, voters in Rhode Island passed a first of its kind for our state facilities bond to support expansion of high-quality early learning spaces. We have \$15 million to invest in facilities, which is another key consideration for expansion, especially in community-based programs is having enough physical space to actually serve the four-year-olds and potentially three-year-olds.

Kayla Rosen:

Facilities and workforce, those are two key investments that have happened recently that we're working on to make sure that we're in a place to continue expansion and continue the momentum. But we are going to face somewhat of a gap in continued operational funding for the classrooms. That's something that we're all really aware of and something that will continue to be talking about at the state level for future budget investments. We are, of course, incredibly hopeful that something like Build Back Better might pass at the federal level that will support our continued sustainability and expansion here in Rhode Island.

Mary Klute:

How did your work through PDG set the stage for that new funding from the state?

Kayla Rosen:

I think PDG helped set us up incredibly well in a couple ways. One again, was that collaboration where making an investment in pre-K or in child care, which is all part of the same birth to five system, we are able to take those funds and invest them in a way that strengthens the system as a whole. Just as Lisa was describing, the pre-K funds are in no way harming our infant toddler part of the system, and in fact, might be strengthening them. We are not taking business away from the fabric of our community-based providers. We are making sure that every decision is done with the community, with families and with the provider network in mind, as opposed to thinking really separately, just based on what each department has in mind.

Kayla Rosen:

PDG has set up that collaboration, those shared goals and the shared idea of what we need to be moving towards as a system, that shared definition of quality and shared kind of perspective on how

we're going to support our birth through five sector in really recovering from the pandemic as well as coming out stronger from the pandemic.

Mary Klute:

What advice do you have for other states that are considering new models to fund preschool?

Lisa Nugent:

I think we can sum that up in one word, which is collaboration. One of the pieces of our mixed delivery system that we didn't talk a lot about is that we also have our classrooms in public schools. Our governance structure right now, Head Starts and our community-based programs, are licensed and governed by DHS in our state and our public schools or LEAs are governed by RIDE. You have two state agencies that are trying to pull money from both agencies to braid together.

Lisa Nugent:

Then we add Kayla in from the governor's office who is helping us braid in the PDG funding, regardless of if your state has an office of early childhood, it still usually doesn't include our children with special needs. We service children with special needs in our RI pre-K programs all the time through an itinerant model, which is embedded services within their classroom. The only way that happens is through communication and collaboration.

Lisa Nugent:

We do have a team that meets once a week. Sometimes that meeting devolves and what we're doing is building relationships with each other. We can pick up the phone and call anybody we want because we have built that relationship and that trust factor that we know we can throw any idea out there and it will be thought of respectfully, even if it's dismissed. I think that would be the key to making this successful.

Kayla Rosen:

If I can add to that. I agree with everything Lisa just said, and I think another important piece is that we start with a shared vision so everyone's on the same page about what we're trying to achieve, which is what's going to be best for kids and families. Yes, we have all these funding streams, they all do different things, but in our heads we sat down and really just led by Lisa and Nicole in particular saying we want families to have choice, because we know there's a lot going on at this age cohort. We want families to have choice. We want to minimize transitions for kids of this age. We want to support the entire birth through five sector. How can we use what's available to us to meet those goals? That kind of foundational principles of, first, what is high-quality pre-K and aligning to those near standards.

Kayla Rosen:

Second, the experience from a family perspective and provide our perspective that we've received a lot of feedback on, how do we make the funding do all those things? It was really a shared goals allowed us to then work towards what we would do with the funds and have everyone be on the same page and be really creative, and as Lisa said, throw some things out there that get shoved right back at you, because they're not a good idea, but it's a place where we can all put ideas out there and see what's going to stick. And so, would just highly encourage having that set of shared goals, really keeping children at the forefront and working kind of the magic in the background with funding streams to get kids what they need. That's what we've been doing as much as we can in Rhode Island.

Mary Klute:

Well, this has been a fantastic conversation and a valuable look into the great work your teams and so many others have been doing in Rhode Island. Kayla and Lisa, thank you so much for joining me today.

Kayla Rosen:

Thanks so much.

Lisa Nugent:

Thank you so much for having us. We love to talk about our state.

Narrator:

Thanks for listening to Early Childhood Policy Matters, produced by the National Technical Assistance Center for Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five. Find more episodes by going to childcareta.acf.hhs.gov and searching for early childhood policy matters. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app or on SoundCloud at EC policy matters.