SECTION 1. The general assembly finds and declares as follows:

(1) The first three (3) years of life are a period of incredible growth in all areas of a baby's development. A child's early relationships with parents and caregivers can promote healthy brain development, build social and emotional skills, and support language and literacy development starting from birth.

(2) Children who come from families who are identified as at-risk based on socioeconomic status, parent education level, and limited parent knowledge or experience are significantly less likely to be proficient in reading and math than other students when they enter school, experiencing an education achievement gap (hereinafter referred to in chapter 87.1 as the "achievement gap") which begins at birth and is often further exacerbated as children progress in their education.

(3) There is overwhelming evidence that the state of Rhode Island could expect a very high return to the public by investing in high quality early childhood programming for all of our children.

(4) Early childhood investments targeted towards program development for disadvantaged children will help to promote both efficiency and educational equality for the children of our state.

(5) While recognizing the efforts that have been made through the "Rhode Island
prekindergarten education act”, chapter 87 of title 16, more effort can and should be expended to
reach children at an even younger age.

(6) The general assembly seeks to develop a research-based model for children ages three
(3) years of age and under and that focuses on low-income and at-risk families to eliminate the
achievement gap.

(7) The expansion of funding for programs that advance outcomes for children during the
early years of life is critical to achieving the state's goal for grade-level reading by the third grade.

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

CHAPTER 87.1

RHODE ISLAND EARLY CHILDHOOD INNOVATION ACT

16-87.1-1. Short title.
This chapter shall be known and may be cited as the "Rhode Island Early Childhood
Innovation Act."

As used in this section:

(1) “Achievement gap” means the difference in educational success and proficiency in
reading and math experienced by children who come from families who are identified as at-risk
based on socioeconomic status, parent education level, and limited parental knowledge or
experience. These children are significantly less likely to be proficient in reading and math than
other students when they enter school, especially in kindergarten, and they experience an
education achievement gap which begins at birth and is often further exacerbated as these
children progress in their education.

(2) “At-risk families” means those who are identified as having one risk factor on the RI
newborn health assessment.

(a) The department of human services shall establish an early childhood innovation fund.
The purpose of this fund shall be to support programs that seek to close the achievement gap that
currently exists for at-risk children as they enter kindergarten. The general assembly shall allocate
one million dollars ($1,000,000) each year to invest in high quality, evidence informed,
voluntary, early childhood models that expand upon the current landscape of programs directed at
children from birth to three (3) years of age, and to allow successful existing programs to serve
more at-risk families. Recipients of funding may include nonprofit organizations, local
governments, universities, and local education authorities.
(b) The department of human services, working together with the department of education, shall create a competitive request for proposals process to allocate funding for the fiscal year no later than October 1 prior to the start of the fiscal year for which funding shall be distributed. The request for proposals should fund only programs with evidence of model effectiveness, clear procedures for ensuring program quality and an ongoing commitment to, and plans for, advanced evaluation of results. Priority should be given to those programs that seek to engage and support parents and caregivers as leaders in their child's education.

(c) The department of human services shall communicate its efforts through this fund with the home visiting program in the department of health to best ensure coordination of efforts across early childhood. Programs funded through this fund will implement procedures for ensuring that families are referred to other state funded early childhood programs such as, but not limited to, department of health evidence-based home visiting programs from which they would benefit. Programs with demonstrated experience linking families to additional resources should be given priority in the funding competition.

16-87.1-4. Reporting.

On or before October 31, 2021, and annually thereafter by October 31, the department of human services shall report back to the general assembly and the governor on the status and progress of the pilot program authorized by this chapter.

SECTION 3. This act shall take effect upon passage.

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This act would establish the Rhode Island Early Childhood Innovation Act. The act would authorize the department of human services to establish an early childhood innovation fund for the purpose of supporting programs designed to narrow the education achievement gap for at-risk children as they enter kindergarten. The act provides the general assembly would allocate $1,000,000 annually to this fund.

This act would take effect upon passage.