

132nd Legislature
Senate
of Maine
Senate District 32

Senator Henry Ingwersen
3 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0003
Office: (207) 287-1515

Testimony of Senator Henry Ingwersen introducing
LD 2066, An Act to Establish the Child Care Employment Award
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
Wednesday, January 21, 2026

Good afternoon, Representative Meyer, and esteemed colleagues on the Health and Human Services Committee. As you know, I am Senator Henry Ingwersen, and I represent Senate District 32, which includes Arundel, Biddeford, Dayton, Hollis, and Lyman. Today, I am pleased to introduce my bill LD 2066, “An Act to Establish the Child Care Employment Award.”

At its core, this bill recognizes a simple truth: our child care system cannot function without the educators and staff who show up every day to care for Maine’s youngest children – and those workers must be able to afford child care themselves.

The Child Care Employment Award is a proven workforce retention tool. Child Care educators are “the workforce behind the workforce.” They make it possible for nurses, teachers, construction workers, small business owners, and countless others to go to work each day. Yet, child care workers themselves remain among the lowest-paid professionals in our state. One of the most common reasons educators leave the field is not lack of dedication or training – it is the inability to afford child care for their own children. The Child Care Employment Award directly addresses this barrier to retaining child care workers.

As of September 2025, the program supports 511 children from 313 working families, meaning hundreds of child care educators are able to remain employed in licensed child care programs because this support exists. Without the Child Care Employment Award, these experienced educators would otherwise be forced to reduce their hours or leave the field entirely – plunging the child care system into an even deeper crisis.

Let me be clear: **Currently, demand far exceeds supply – and the waitlist is not moving.** The program is operating at full capacity, and there are 470 children from 312 families on the waitlist. Even more concerning, the waitlist has not moved since October 2024 – 15 months ago. Yet, these families are still working in child care programs, still supporting Maine’s economy, and still finding themselves unable to access help.

What does this level of unmet demand indicate? The program is meeting a real and urgent workforce need. Unless we continue it, hundreds of educators risk losing the stability that allows them to stay in the field.

The Child Care Employment Award supplements funding from the Child Care Affordability Program. Therefore, this bill does not create duplication or inefficiency. Instead, it seeks to maximize existing public investments. In fact, 62% of participating families are eligible for the Child Care Affordability Program and receive CCAP subsidies. Where does the Child Care Employment Award fit in? It covers the required co-payments. The average weekly co-payment covered is approximately \$114 – a cost that would otherwise fall squarely on child care workers earning low wages.

The remaining 38% of families earn too much to qualify for CCAP, but they still have barriers to affording and accessing child care. The Child Care Employment Award fills this gap, ensuring subsidy dollars are used first when available and targeted support is provided only where it is needed. This “braided” approach stretches CCAP dollars further and strengthens the entire child care subsidy system.

At the same time, it supports children during their most critical development years:

- 23% are infants and toddlers
- 35% are preschool-aged children
- 42% are school-aged children

These percentages reflect the real lives of child care workers, many of whom have multiple children with different care needs. Importantly, the educators supported by this program are caring for children during the most rapid and critical period of brain development. Research shows that more than 90% of brain development occurs before age five. Furthermore, stable, responsive relationships with skilled caregivers are foundation to lifelong learning, health, and emotional well-being.

In other words, when we invest in child care educators, we are also directly investing in:

- Early language development
- Social-emotional skills
- School readiness
- Long-term educational and economic outcomes

Workforce instability *weakens* these relationships, and retention *strengthens* them.

Fortunately, the Child Care Employment Award is not a new idea. LD 2066 builds on a successful pilot program. At the beginning, the Child Care Employment Award was intentionally launched as a two-year pilot program to test design, implementation, and demand. The results are clear: Strong uptake, effective coordination with CCAP, and significant unmet need. LD 2066

allows Maine to build on what is working, rather than dismantling a program that educators, employers, and families now rely on.

And the Child Care Employment Award isn't just successful in Maine; other states show this approach works, as well. States such as Kentucky have adopted categorical eligibility for child care workers, ensuring that the people caring for young children can access affordable child care themselves. Early outcomes from these policies show improved recruitment, higher retention, and greater program stability. The Child Care Employment Award aligns with this proven approach, tailored to Maine's child care subsidy system and workforce realities.

Finally, the Child Care Employment Award is an investment in Maine's economy. When child care workers can afford child care for their own children, staffing levels stabilize, classrooms stay open, and parents across *all* sectors can continue working. This program is not simply a benefit for individual educators – it is essential infrastructure.

And there is another thing we can consider as lawmakers: When a program is fully utilized, demonstrating strong demand and clearly working as intended, then our responsibility is to sustain it. Too often, pilot programs that are fundamentally helping Maine people are allowed to expire – not because they failed, but because they succeeded...and outgrew their initial scope.

The Child Care Employment Award, on the other hand, is exactly the kind of program pilots are meant to produce: It's well designed, data driven, and responsive to a real need – that isn't going away anytime soon. Letting it lapse would undermine both workforce stability and child development in Maine.

I thank the committee for its time, and I would be happy to answer any questions.



Henry Ingwersen
State Senator, Senate District 32
Arundel, Biddeford, Dayton, Hollis, and Lyman