

Testimony of Nicole Rea  
Coordinator/Biddeford Ready!

In Support of LD 258, "An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024, and June 30, 2025"

(Governor's Bill) Sponsored by Representative Melanie Sachs

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Tuesday, February 21, 2023, State House Room 228

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, members of the Health and Human Services, my name is Nicole Rea, Coordinator for Biddeford Ready!, and I reside in Kennebunk, Maine.

*Initiative: Provides funding to annualize funds received in Public Law 2021, chapter 635 for salary supplements awarded to individuals who provide childcare or are early childhood educators.*

I'm testifying to support the salary supplement investments for early childhood educators working in childcare programs. I'm also asking for you to increase the investments in this salary supplement program.

As aforementioned, I work for a collective impact initiative called Biddeford Ready! Our mission is to ensure all children in Biddeford enter school ready to thrive. That means increasing access to quality early childhood education for all children in Biddeford. My role as coordinator for this initiative requires that I listen to and form relationships with early educators and childcare providers, business owners, parents/caregivers, and other nonprofit organizations working on behalf of children.

Early educators tell me of children entering their programs with increased socio-emotional challenges because they are isolated from other children due to the lasting effects of COVID-19 and the childcare crisis. They have done everything they can to entice workers, but profit margins have shrunk to an unsustainable level, and most are operating under-staffed and under capacity. Many others have decided to close their doors in the years after 2020.

I hear from business owners that employee engagement and retention are down, and unreliable childcare is a significant contributor. Finally, I hear from families, parents, and caregivers who struggle to find openings in childcare centers for their children, and often when they do, they

cannot afford to send their children. Low wages for early educators and childcare providers affect entire communities, our economy, and the health and well-being of families.

An acronym borrowed from United Way called ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, and describes families that are employed yet unable to meet basic needs like childcare. Families under this description make too much to qualify for subsidized childcare but not enough to afford placement for their children. The work I do is personal for me because I am ALICE. I am a full-time working mother with a master's degree who cannot afford childcare. While I am fortunate that I have a family to help fill this need for us, many families do not have the luxury of having family members who can help. My daughter entered preschool with socio-emotional challenges. While she was loved and cared for at home, she did not have experience in early education environments with children her age and struggled to adapt. We must do better for our children, our families, our economy, and our communities. It is time to invest in early childhood education.

Later this session there will be a bill to propose increases to the salary supplement program and I ask you to support these measures to help save child care in the state of Maine.