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Testimony of Suzanne Pelkey before  
the Committee On Appropriations and Financial Affairs and  
the Committee on Health and Human Services  
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

February 21, 2023

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Suzanne Pelkey and I am the Director of Child Development for the Bangor Region YMCA. I support the investments in the child care industry in the Governor's budget proposal.

Collectively, the 15 YMCAs in Maine are the largest childcare provider in the state. We serve thousands of children in our early childhood education programs, before/after school programs, and summer camp. These programs provide children with safe, nurturing and enriching care, and are a critical component of our state's infrastructure to support working parents and our economy.

There are a couple components of this bill in particular that I want to highlight as impactful for the Bangor Region YMCA. We greatly appreciate the Governor's inclusion of these initiatives.

- 1) 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. (Page 307)

The salary supplements allotted to direct care providers were appreciated and beneficial to our teachers and staff. This program essentially added a dollar to their hourly pay. This allowed them to align more closely or slightly exceed the local service areas rates of pay in our community for child care workers, allowing them to attempt to meet the skyrocketing cost of living that has occurred nationwide. This increase potentially allowed us to meet the increased education and training requirements of QRIS. Losing this funding will not only strain program budgets beyond capacity as we try to meet that higher pay rate, but negatively impact the staff members who already struggle to survive with salaries lower than most industries in the state.

The field of Early Childhood Education (ECE) is currently experiencing a work force shortage that affects not only the staff, but the families in Maine communities. We are

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no exception to the hiring and staff shortage issues that are plaguing the country and State of Maine. As the educational and training standards have been implemented through programs such as QRIS and NAEYC have grown, the ability for centers to meet these standards has decreased due in part to salary inequality and availability of essential and mandatory trainings. We are expecting teachers to hold two and four-year degrees that are equivalent to certified teachers and educational technicians in school systems, yet they are paid significantly less for the same work, often with higher standards and responsibilities. Highly trained, skilled and educated early education teachers cannot support themselves and their families on the current salaries and they often move into the public and private school sector or even worse, they leave the field of education altogether. To be able to pay equitable and living wages, centers would need to increase parent fees to a point that families would not be able to afford them. The state subsidy system does not meet the financial burden for high quality centers forcing centers to not accept or limit financial assistance because they can not afford to, causing more hardship on families in need.

Teacher and staff turnover and vacancies have negatively impacted our program immensely in a number of ways. First and foremost, the lack of consistent staffing due to the inability to hire and retain staff has caused staff to experience extreme levels of stress and burnout. This leads to highly qualified staff calling out to care for their own mental and physical needs. Teachers and staff who are experiencing this level of stress cannot be expected to be at their best when working with children. They then leave the field for job opportunities that do not put them in this place mentally or physically, even if that means outright leaving education fully.

With lack of staffing, the program is impacted in a number of ways that leads to a higher potential for lower quality of education and care. These include the inability for teachers to utilize time out of the classrooms to have authentic supervision to support and grow professionally, create and prepare curriculums, complete assessments and connect with families in meaningful ways- all standards in the Quality Rating and Improvement System. There are times teachers cannot leave the rooms to use the bathroom or attend to personal needs during their working hours because that will put the classroom out of ratio, which is a serious licensing violation, and there are literally no other people to step in to support them. This does not lend itself to a healthy working environment. Programmatically we often need to move children into classrooms they are not assigned to or temporarily close full classrooms down in order to be in licensing ratio compliance. Children need consistency and structure, this creates a system in which we are not fully able to practice best practices in our field nor meet the QRIS standards that we have strived to meet. Without proper staffing structures, teachers must do the bare minimum to meet the basic needs of the children in our care while trying to implement the evidence-based curriculum that is in place. This is an impossible and unfair situation to teachers, children and the families

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that place their children in our care expecting a high-quality program.

The work of educating and caring for young children is highly skilled and complex. In this field, we fight for recognition and respect for what is done in programs every day and what the actual expectations are from society, families and our governmental bodies. Quality early education lays the base for healthy adults and strong communities. Research is clear that providing our youngest population with high quality, supportive, evidence-based programs sets children up to be successful in school and beyond in all aspects of human development. Those of us who have been in the field for decades as well as those who are just starting their careers do not do it for any other reason than for the children. We make a difference. They may never remember our names or faces, but we helped them develop lifelong skills that continue to be built on and support them throughout their lives. We influence the future of our communities by working with children and we love this. We love this enough to fight for equality and recognition for the work that we do, for ourselves and our children. We stay, but we struggle personally and professionally.

- 2) Funding to annualize funds received in Public Law 2021, chapter 679, An Act to Expand the Statewide Voluntary The work of teaching and caring for young children is highly skilled and complex, yet employment in early care and education has largely failed to generate wages that allow early educators to meet their basic needs. Early Childhood Consultation Program, for the Early Childhood Consultation Program. (Page 333)

Our program at the Bangor Region YMCA has seen a significant increase in negative behaviors in children as young as 18 months old. They include (but are not limited to) moderate to severe aggressive and dangerous behaviors, hyperactivity, impaired social and emotional skills, dysregulated behaviors atypical to developmental levels and anxiety. This issue has a significant effect on the program which strives to be inclusive for children and families. Staff are not equipped to understand or deal with the high level and sheer number of high level atypical needs these children have. Many staff are not trained or educated for special purpose programs at this level. We are not funded to support the staffing needed to help these children, nor do we have the mental health specialists to assist us in planning for this degree of behaviors. Resources for these children and families are scarce and waiting lists for referrals and services are long, meanwhile teachers are struggling to keep children safe while meeting the needs of the classrooms. Teachers, staff and children are getting physically abused daily by very young children, forcing the program to repeatedly send children home to frustrated families that do not know how to navigate a large and complicated mental health system. Many teachers, staff and interns do not return due to the stress that behavior related issues cause. Budgets barely pay the current staff, much less adding support staff to numerous children within one classroom and a center. The teachers

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and staff are frustrated and feel helpless to help the children that need them the most. The media focuses on the high numbers of suspension and expulsions, but without truly exploring the causes and the extreme behaviors which disable our classrooms with little support to address. This creates animosity in the communities towards our early education teachers and programs. It is an epidemic which needs to be further addressed quickly.

The implementation of state supported programs such as the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership and the Help Me Grow network has been a fantastic start to addressing this need, though expansion is necessary. Our center was fortunate enough to be a pilot program over the last year with the ECCP. We found it helpful and it allowed us to have some short term classroom support with classroom management and mental health support ideas, as well as to offer families support and resources in the home. The issue that remains at the crux of the problem is that all too often, we cannot fully implement the plans and suggestions that the mental health consultants share over the short span of weeks they spend with us observing and discussing with the teachers because that takes manpower. These are staff hours that we do not have available due to tightening budgets and scarce staffing options. This, and other programs like it, is a crucial program that needs to be expanded to support centers, staff, families and children struggling every day.

Early education programs in the state of Maine have been gifted the chance to influence the future and the impact high quality programs on that is immense. To do this the State has put in place a framework of standards. The QRIS program the state has implemented is a strong tool to advance quality and enhance not only the learning for children in developmentally appropriate ways, but to encourage professional growth as well as family partnerships. The State has set the bar high and as professionals, we want our programs to excel. The issue at hand is not the high bar. We believe in the importance of the standards. The issue is that we have not been given the resources and financial support to meet this goal at this time. Until these issues are truly addressed we will continue to see highly qualified and amazing staff leave our centers, not because they want to but because they have no other choice. Without addressing the financial support to staff, families and programs, centers will continue to struggle and many will fail when Maine's communities need them the most for our working families.

Ensuring that all young children have an equal opportunity for healthy growth and development is a long-term investment in Maine's future prosperity. 90% of a child's brain develops as early as five years old, and positive early learning experiences establish strong foundations for the brain's architecture. We appreciate the initiatives outlined in the Governor's budget, and look

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forward to working with you and your colleagues this session to further increase the state investment in this critical sector.

Respectfully submitted,

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