



February 20, 2023

Testimony of Kathryn Soucy on behalf of Starting Strong 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 on Health and Human Services

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 Katie Soucy and I am the director of a coalition of over 35 organizations in Portland called Starting Strong. Together, Starting Strong works to improve outcomes for young children and families in the Portland community. I submit this testimony on behalf of Starting Strong in support of LD258 and specifically the investments being made in Maine's early childhood education workforce, Head Start and the Early Childhood Consultation Program.

Starting Strong is focused on increasing access to high quality early childhood care and education as a key strategy towards supporting the overall success of young children, their families and our community. Our commitment to ensuring that children and families receive high quality early childhood care and education is based on years of extensive research which point to the positive long-term success of such programming. Despite our collective efforts, significant gaps and barriers to high quality child care and early childhood education exist in Portland and across Maine. More specifically, recent data indicates that the availability of early care and education services is grossly insufficient and that Portland children from low-income or culturally and linguistically diverse families disproportionately lack access to high quality services compared to children from other populations. Unfortunately, the circumstances contributing to Maine's early childhood care and education crisis are complex, long-standing and increasingly dire.

That said, the barrier we find most key to addressing today's child care crisis is the early childhood workforce shortage. In Portland we have several child care, preK, and Head Start classrooms that are licensed and prepared to welcome students yet remain empty due to a lack of qualified teachers. I can think of three specific examples on the Portland peninsula alone. Without teachers these programs can

not enroll students. As many of my fellow advocates have or will note, attracting and retaining quality early childhood educators is difficult for many reasons, not the least of which is the low pay and lack of public structures and support for their profession.

The funding included in LD258 is greatly appreciated and is part of a critical step towards addressing the low wages that plague the child care industry. As you may know, early childhood educators working in licensed programs are currently receiving \$200 per month under this funding initiative. By July 1st, the salary supplements will become tiered based on an educator's experience, credentials, and higher education.

This funding **and more** is critical to addressing the child care workforce shortage. According to the U.S. Treasury, child care educators are paid in the bottom 2% of wage earners in the country. This critically important workforce is grossly underpaid largely in an attempt to keep child care affordable for working families. However, without public investment, the sector will remain in crisis. Parents will attempt to pay higher and higher tuition rates until they eventually can not - which will likely result in the continued decline of availability and increase inequity of access. For many families, childcare will become completely out of reach.

Most families can not afford to pay what early childhood educators deserve to make. This difficult problem is not new, but one that has become greater and more glaringly obvious as a vast majority of children in Maine now have all available parents or caregivers in the workforce. We are on the precipice of a breaking point.

As the parent of a four-year-old, this matter touches close to home. My own family has struggled to find child care when our provider permanently closed. After several months, we were thrilled when our turn came on one of the waiting lists we had been on. Unfortunately, we also learned that due to staffing shortages at the center our son would be shuffled between classrooms and cared for by a series of short term substitutes until they could find qualified teachers - hardly an ideal situation. My family is not alone in struggling to find care that supports our child while allowing both parents to remain or enter work.

In this day and age, when most families need two incomes to survive and our economy needs every worker we have, it seems more than logical to publicly invest in Maine's child care system now and into the future. And, at the heart of this system are early childhood educators. Investing in the teachers who work in child care will make certain that our youngest children receive the experiences that build the foundation for lifelong learning while families are able to work and contribute to their communities.

Maine can not afford to ignore the child care crisis any longer. The consequences of a failing system ripple across communities impacting children, their families, employers and the future health and prosperity of our entire state. Please support LD258 and the important investments it makes in early childhood care and education.