

Testimony of Michelle Belanger M.Ed

In support of

LD 1726 An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care and Working Families

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Michelle Belanger and I am an Early Childhood Educator of over 20 years working in Portland. I'm testifying in support of LD 1726 An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care and Working Families.

I fully support LD 1726 and believe that it is crucial to raise child care educator wages in Maine. Child care providers play a vital role in supporting families and communities, and they deserve fair compensation for their hard work and dedication. We are facing a time where the majority of children's caregivers are needed in the workforce and children under the age of 5 deserve quality early care and education by educators who are well compensated and committed to the field. After hearing of the unanimous vote to approve starting wages for our K-12 teachers, why is the same consideration not being applied for the educators who are preparing our youngest children at the most critical time in their lives?

I also believe that developing a cost model tool that better supports our understanding of what it costs to provide quality care and education is essential. By having a more accurate understanding of the costs involved, we can make better decisions and provide better support to child care providers. For years, childcare providers and institutions have been subsidizing the cost of early childhood education by keeping costs at a level where working parents can afford to send their children and because of that, can not afford to compensate educators what they are worth or even charge the true cost of care for the children in care. Making this a losing financial model on all fronts.

Furthermore, raising subsidy eligibility for Maine's lower-income families is critical to ensuring that every child has access to quality child care. It is important that we support families in need and provide them with the resources necessary to give their children the best possible start in life. The gap between what families can afford and what childcare costs, is just going to grow. Especially in a time where resources for at-risk children and families are at an all time low and people can make more money doing work that is far less important for the foundation of our economy.

I also support the proposal to ensure that subsidy reimbursement covers days when children are absent from their program. This will provide more stable funding for child care programs and enable providers to budget more effectively. Would you expect to only pay a portion of your car payment if you don't drive your car for a day or two? How are centers supposed to budget for subsidy payments for when (not if) children get sick and are out or are able to spend a day at

home with a parent, who typically works? This is going to cause providers to not want to accept child care subsidies, which will furthermore add to the unavailability of childcare slots overall.

Providing funding to pay for child care for child care employees is also essential. This will ensure that child care providers can afford to care for their own children while providing care for others. At least half of my educators are forced to work a second job to make ends meet. By not having to worry about a childcare payment, will allow them to engage more in the childcare field and commit to the children they are working with and not be worried about having to work a second job at night or on the weekends.

Finally, I support the proposal to shorten time periods for determining subsidy eligibility and child care programs receiving subsidy reimbursement. This will make the process more efficient and allow providers to receive the support they need more quickly. At my center, we get no less than 10 people who knock on our door every week, looking for childcare for their children. These caregivers are often met with an explanation of how to get on our waitlist in tandem with figuring out financial payments. When applying for child care subsidy, it can take up to 30 days to become approved and another 2-3 weeks to receive payment. I could not imagine telling my employer that I would love to accept an offer of employment, in 30 days when I get approved for childcare subsidy. Also, I couldn't imagine any business having to wait 2-3 weeks for payments for services or goods already given. Again, this leads to less and less providers willing to take child care subsidy and more and more families left without care during this critical time in a child's development.

Overall, LD 1726 is an important step in improving and rebuilding Maine's child care system and ensuring that every child has access to quality care and education. I urge the Legislature to support this bill and invest in the future of our children, families and communities.

Thank you  
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