

Testimony of
Sasha Shunk
In support of

LD 1799 An Act to Expand Maine's High-quality Early Learning and Care for Children by Increasing Public Preschool Opportunities in Communities

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Sasha Shunk. I own a family child care program in Portland. I'm testifying in support of LD 1799 An Act to Expand Maine's High-quality Early Learning and Care for Children by Increasing Public Preschool Opportunities in Communities.

My program has been operating for almost 20 years and provides early care and education for 15 part time and full time children. My program is Nationally Accredited, the first in the state to be a Nature Explore certified outdoor classroom, and I employ three full time, high quality educators.

I, and one of my lead teachers hold a bachelor's and master's degree in early childhood education. My other lead teacher has an associate's degree in early childhood, State of Maine Inclusion credential and is currently working towards her bachelor's degree in early childhood special education.

My program has been providing high quality pre-K for 3 and 4 year olds for two decades. As public pre-K expansion happened in my community, my program was not eligible for a public pre-K partnership although we meet all Chapter 124 rules and even use Pre-K for ME, the same pre-K curriculum that the public schools and other partners use.

This barrier for family child care to partner for publicly funded pre-K services unfortunately left children and families who utilize our smaller programming out of the opportunity to receive their free public education in my program.

While school districts and communities have been well intentioned in their desire to expand publicly funded pre-K opportunities, there is still room for improvement on how child care programs and specifically family child care is included in Maine's pre-K system.

Children learn in different environments. For some, mixed ages and small group settings allow them to thrive. We've sent hundreds of children off to kindergarten ready to learn because of our high quality of care and education.

Family child care programs can also offer the full day programming which families need to get to work to support their bottom line. This programming includes before and after publicly funded pre-K hours and summer programming. Our programs cannot, however, operate as before and after care for 4 year olds who attend public pre-K in other programs. We must fill our day time spots in order to maintain business practices and pay our overhead.

To better include family child care as part of the publicly funded pre-K system, LD 1799 looks to reduce barriers such as how publicly pre-K is funded to support multiple programs like mine. It provides an opportunity to align training, credentials and degrees across those who work in child care programs and those who work in public education.

LD 1799 would also develop a Commission to study how we align state governance, programming and funding of our early childhood educational programming which currently span multiple offices and Departments.

I think of the children and families who have missed out on publicly funded opportunities in my program and so many other family child care programs and I urge you to please support LD 1799 and let's eliminate these barriers to support working families and family child care programs.