



Senator Rafferty, Rep. Brennan and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, thank you for the chance to testify in support of LD 1799. My name is Cate Blackford and I am the public policy director for the Maine People's Alliance. MPA is Maine's largest community action organization with over 32,000 members stretching from Kittery to Fort Kent. MPA believes everyone should have what they need, contribute what they can, and no one should be left behind.

I am here to express MPA's support for LD 1799 and the expansion of public pre-K. Access to public pre-kindergarten is key to helping ensure every family in Maine has what they need.

Most Maine parents are in the workforce and need child care. These parents should not have to choose between working or giving their children the proper care, but many parents – most often, mothers – are forced to make such a choice.

For some parents, this is because child care is too expensive – parents often pay more for child care than they do for housing, and the average cost of center-based child care is equivalent to University of Maine in-state tuition.

For others, it's because child care is simply inaccessible. Many child care centers closed before and during the pandemic, and those that remain open struggle to find, and keep, workers. More than one in five Mainers live in a child care "desert," where there are more than three children under age 5 for each licensed child care slot.

I can tell you from personal experience, that full-day PreK is an enormous gift to parents and children. The day my (then) 4-year-old won a spot in the full day, 5-day, public pre-K program in Brunswick, it felt like we won the lottery.

That spot made our family budget feel huge! It meant we weren't having to pay \$65/day for preschool. We didn't have to navigate waiting lists and trying to get into the other local preschools. We didn't have to manage conflicting schedules for our kids. Our youngest got on the bus with her big sister every morning and came home with her every afternoon. She LOVED her teacher, her classmates, and going to school. (A giant shout out to Ms. Jordan at Kate Furbish!) The center-based activities and the play-based classroom were excellent in their own right and set her up to succeed this year in Kindergarten. Every family in Maine should have access to this kind of early childhood care and learning.

When we have the early childhood education we need, it benefits families, our communities, our economy – and our children. This bill plans for a comprehensive expansion of public pre-K across Maine. By passing it, we take an important step towards ensuring every child has the care and education they need.

Thank you for your time and consideration.