



Testimony of Jennifer Wescott
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 Jennifer Wescott. I am the Chair of the Family Child Care Association of Maine and. 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.

"In the 2019-20 school year, just 29 of 62 state-funded pre-K programs reported that they allowed FCCs to be included in their program; and of the 24 states that allowed it, only 10 states were able to report enrollment – with most serving less than 1% of preschool children in home-based settings. This leaves the knowledge base on what works in supporting FCCs in publicly-funded programs extremely limited." <https://nieer.org/research-report/conditions-for-success>

While publicly funded pre-K is expanding around the state, there are no active family child care pre-K partnerships. Of the 35% of pre-K programs that are in partnerships, they occur in centers or Head Start programs. Maine has around 712 licensed family child care programs who are already offering educational and care services for 4-year olds.

Despite the inclusion of family child care programs as part of Maine's mixed delivery pre-K system, these programs are the backbone of many of our communities and especially our rural areas. Family child care programs typically support lower income families due to lower tuition rates, having more options for non-traditional work hours, or meeting the needs of families in their proximity to home or work.

Other reasons that family child care is vital to early childhood education is the proven research of the benefits of children being part of mixed age programming. There have been studies of the cognitive and social benefits to children of different ages learning together and having siblings bond during the day and not separated by age group.

For family child care to be equitably included in access to stable, public pre-K funding and to serve children and families, we must address the current barriers that exist. Too often family child care is not valued for the skilled, nurturing and educational work that we do. We are not

babysitting children. Family child care providers meet health and safety standards, have training and credentials, and many have years of experience with young children.

Some of the barriers that exist include the way that public funding for 4 year olds is distributed in the system. When a school district does not want to partner with a family child care program, there is no other option for the program to access those public resources for their children and families. The other barrier is that many 4 year olds attend child care outside of their school district due to their families work schedules. For 4 year olds to have better access to publicly funded pre-K opportunities that meet the needs of their families, then we must consider those children who do not have access within their school district.

Limiting the transitions of young children is foundational to early childhood development. By providing publicly funded pre-K programming that is not attentive to children's transitions, we are doing a disservice. To have 4-year olds on buses twice a day to attend a program for 2.5 hours, is not what is best for children.

By better including family child care in public pre-K, children could stay in one location, extend on their learning for full day opportunities, and families would have the peace of mind that their child is not being shuffled to multiple places throughout the week.

Family child care providers also need to be represented better in educator qualifications. Currently, providers can earn credentials through the Maine Roads Quality Professional Development Network. These credentials are high quality, relevant, and meet the needs of training for child care professionals. However, these credentials do not count towards 081 certifications needed through MDOE. This leaves many family child care providers unable to meet educational requirements to be public pre-K locations. Family child care providers often work 50-60 hour weeks, leaving no time to pursue higher education degrees at universities. They need meaning, flexible pathways to meet Chapter 124 teaching requirements.

Lastly, family child care programs cannot afford to lose their 4 year old children. For many programs that may lead to permanent closure which affects all children and families utilizing their services. The business model of child care runs on razor thin margins. Family child care cannot simply operate as before and after care for their public school systems. We rely on our full day children to keep operations afloat.

Supporting LD 1799 and reducing these barriers for family child care to participate in the stable funding that public pre-K brings to early childhood education means providing more opportunity for children and working families as well as supporting this vital sector of the child care industry.

When you think of family child care, we hope you see us as the teachers we are capable of providing the highest quality care for all our children and families.

Please support LD 1799.