

Testimony of Will Newburn  
In support of  
***LD 1726: An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families  
sponsored by Senate President Troy Jackson***

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Will Newburn. I am a Child Care Center Director, and I live in South Portland. I'm testifying in support of LD 1726 An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care and Working Families.

Child Care Providers are amongst the lowest paid people in the state. According to Salary.com the average Trash Collector in Maine makes 34% more than the average Child Care Provider yet has almost none of the educational demands of those of us in Early Childhood Education, and the average Elementary School Teacher in Maine makes more than twice as much (105% more), yet complain that they don't make a living wage. We have been raising salaries rapidly over the past few years just to try to hold on to the staff we have, but it's still not enough to attract new staff, people can still make more money elsewhere doing easier jobs. We are at a point where the math doesn't make sense, the salaries need to increase an enormous amount to attract educated teachers, but most parents can't afford to pay more than they do already.

This difficult situation has slowly been getting worse for years, we used to have many teachers joining us as graduates of Early Childhood Education programs but now those programs are devoid of applicants as it is known as a low paying career where you are going to struggle to pay back your loans.

Just as our staff qualifications have been declining due to the aforementioned lack of students in these programs, which is in turn is due to the rock bottom salaries and lack of public investment; DHHS's Office of Child and Family Services led by Dr. Todd Landry decided that this Spring was the time to introduce a new Quality Rating System for Child Care in Maine. This new system adds the requirement that 50% of our staff have a degree in Early Childhood Education or an equivalent, or else we lose our highest quality rating which in turn loses our families a double tax credit on their Maine State Taxes. Despite a unified voice in the public testimony against this change, Dr. Todd Landry decided to barrel forward and enact this putting further burden on this struggling industry and the families that rely on it.

We have been closing classrooms, and reducing our enrollment due to lack of staff. Many other Child Care programs have shut down altogether, and it is only a matter of time that there will be no childcare left if this gets ignored again. Many of these issues have been in previous bills that have not passed and I'm afraid you are going to kick this can down the road too many times until it is too late.

I would propose subsidizing salaries for those of us in this important field to at least the level of the local Trash Collectors and adding more for those who have a relevant degree to the level of the local Elementary School Teachers. I would also propose rolling back the recent changes enacted by DHHS before they speed up the decline of Child Care in the state.

A cost model tool will give you more accurate data than is available to you now and the better the data you have the better the decisions you can make. The reimbursement rates have always been too low and providers don't want to accept them because they won't actually cover the true cost of care.

Affording high quality child care is too expensive for all but the highest earners in the state, many report it as "like having another mortgage", increasing the subsidy eligibility even this little amount can make a big difference.

The margins are so tight in child care and we rely on knowing our revenue. If a child is absent and we don't get paid for that spot for those days, do we not pay the teacher, do we not pay our electricity bill? I'm not sure why the state would put us in that position, we don't accept that from anybody else!

This is going to be a long road to build up investment in a problem that has been swept under the rug for a long time. Making a long term plan will help everyone know what to expect moving forward because the unknown right now is pretty scary.

Head Start offers a high quality program for those at the lowest or no income levels. The research that has been performed on the impacts of such programs is absolutely astounding, it would be a waste of taxpayers money not to fund this. If you want supporting evidence, take a look at the Perry Preschool Project, the longest running longitudinal study offering a high quality preschool program to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

I support providing funding to pay for child care for child care employees because many people drop out of the workforce because they don't make enough to pay for care for their children, even at their place of employment. It often makes more sense for them to stay at home instead, meaning there are less people working in childcare and less spots available for other families.

I also support shortened time periods for child care programs receiving subsidy reimbursement because many programs are right on the edge of surviving, and many have closed down. If reimbursement was more swift they might have survived.

Please vote in support of LD 1726,  
Will Newburn