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Testimony 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

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
May 10, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Committee on Education,

I am Eamonn Dundon, Director of Advocacy for the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce. We represent 1,300 businesses in our region who employ over 65,000 Mainers. We are submitting this written testimony today to express our organization's strongest support for LD 1799.

We have collaborated with Starting Strong, a Portland based coalition focused on establishing the building blocks for lifetime learning, in 2020, 2021, and again this year to survey our membership and investigate the impacts of lack of childcare on the business community in our region. Our survey spanned businesses from small storefronts with a handful of workers up to some of the largest employers in the state and the results were clear: a lack of childcare poses a significant challenge to hiring, training, and retaining employees and the current programs in place are not enough to address this overwhelming need.

82% of our members report that their employees have trouble finding childcare, up from 70% just before the pandemic in 2020. This translates into very real business impediments that undermine our economic development efforts at the state and local level, with 88% of our members saying that their employees experience unplanned work absences due to lack of childcare, and nearly 65% saying that lack of childcare has caused issues when it comes to employee retention, up from 46% just one year ago. Fully 95% of our members who identified lack of childcare as a problem for their business gave availability and affordability as the biggest barriers to their employees finding childcare, both of which would be helped by the vision for a mixed-delivery pre-K system laid out in this legislation.

This legislation also holds implications for the development of Maine's 21st century workforce. While it will provide immediate relief to working families, it will also lay a solid foundation for future workers. Research has demonstrated the importance of pre-K as a building block for a child's later learning, especially for early learners from lower income backgrounds who are better able to close gaps with their more well-resourced peers with the supports that high-quality pre-K provides. We cannot build the workforce of tomorrow without investing in learners at the earliest stage of their educational journey.

We thank you for your time and commitment to all Mainers, and we ask for your expeditious approval of this important legislation.