



Maine Equal Justice
People Policy Solutions

126 Sewall Street
Augusta, ME 04330-6822
TTY/Voice: (207) 626-7058
Fax: (207) 621-8148
www.mejp.org

Ann Danforth
Policy Advocate
(207) 626-7058 x216
adanforth@mejp.org

Testimony on Behalf of Maine Equal Justice *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

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Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Ann Danforth and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a Policy Advocate at Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

Quality, affordable child care and early learning is critical to helping Maine families achieve economic security and opportunity.

Even before the pandemic, a shortage of quality, affordable child care and early learning was one of the most common barriers to finding and keeping a job for parents with low income. Close to 70% of Maine children under the age of six live in households in which all parents are working, according to the most recent data available¹. We know that if these parents don't have access to child care, they can't go to work. In addition to the shortage of supply, parents also face the significant barrier of affordability. When compared to other household expenses, child care can exceed housing costs and college tuition.²

Quality child care and early learning help set children up for success

In addition to enabling parents to work, high-quality early learning experiences are important in their own right. Children who attend high-quality pre-K are more likely to arrive at kindergarten ready to

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<https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/5057-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force?loc=1&loct=1#detailed/2/21/false/2048,1729,37,871,870,869,36,868,867,133/any/11472,11473>

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https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/2021%20Price%20of%20Care%20State%20Sheets/Maine_Price%20Fact%20Sheet%202021.pdf

learn, are less likely to be held back in school or to need special education services, and more likely to be proficient in reading and math. These positive outcomes continue to unfold across the lifespan. For example, the median lifetime earnings for those with a BA is \$2.8M, compared to \$1.2M for those who dropout of high school.³ That difference of \$1.6M will have a significant positive impact on the lives of those who are able to attain a BA - and in turn it will have positive impacts on their children and so on.

Programs that begin at birth lead to better outcomes for children and yield up to a 13% annual return on public investment.⁴

LD 1799 would benefit children, families, and employers

Public preschool is an affordable early learning option for families, but it is available to too few Maine families. Maine has made progress on public pre-K expansion over the past decade, reaching 50% enrollment for the first time ever. Unfortunately, There is still a large geographic disparity in access to public pre-K across Maine, and many programs have limited enrollment and offer limited hours per week.

This bill would further strengthen our pre-k system by expanding public pre-k infrastructure, funding, staffing, and programming through stakeholder input. And the required annual report to the Legislature will help inform future policy decisions to improve access to public pre-K.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we support LD 1799 because it helps to ensure parents and caregivers, no matter their income or geography, have access to quality, affordable child care and early learning so they can sustain employment while providing their children with the support and learning necessary for healthy development. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of this bill.

³ <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/collegepayoff2021/#summary>

⁴ https://www.mekids.org/site/assets/files/2031/2023_kidscount_databook_interactive.pdf and https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2892417