

Maine Education Association

Grace Leavitt President | Jesse Hargrove Vice President | Beth French Treasurer
Rebecca Cole NEA Director | Rachelle Bristol Executive Director

Testimony In Support of

LD 1726 An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families **Grace Leavitt, President, Maine Education Association** **Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services** **May 10, 2023**

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

My name is Grace Leavitt. My pronouns are she, her, hers. I am serving as President of the Maine Education Association while on leave from teaching Spanish in MSAD 51. I have over 43 years of classroom teaching experience with 20 years as a National Board Certified teacher. The MEA represents nearly 24,000 educators in our Maine system of public education in pre-K-12 schools as well as in our institutions of higher education, both the University of Maine System and the Maine Community College System, along with students in teacher prep programs as well as many retired educators.

I am writing this testimony on behalf of MEA in support of LD 1726, An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families.

Several years ago, the MEA Board of Directors voted to join the Right From the Start Coalition (<https://www.rightfromthestartmaine.org/>) as it was clear that there were great differences in what the children entering our schools had experienced in early childhood and this meant great disparities in students' readiness to learn and further progress in their continued learning.

When my own children were young, there was no greater stress in my life than finding quality childcare for them. I was incredibly fortunate to not only locate wonderful providers who had space for my children, but also to be able to afford to pay what they charged—and what they charged was nowhere near what they were worth. My children's caregivers were excellent—I could never have afforded to pay them what they really deserved, both for the great care they gave my children, the safe spaces they provided, and the support they gave me as well. And I certainly would not have been able to continue teaching without these angels as a part of our lives.

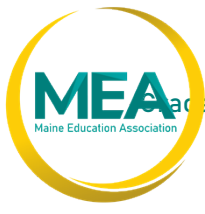
A generation later, and one of my daughters is now a parent herself. And she struggled as she endeavored to find the childcare she needed as she went back to work after her parental leave. Ultimately, it was her father, who was retired, who stepped in to fill the void as best as possible—of course he was caring and attentive and reliable, but it was not an ideal situation, neither for him nor for my daughter's family.

Then the pandemic hit. And there was even less availability or accessibility of providers, and given concerns for an elderly parent's health, the aforementioned arrangement came to an end.

At MEA, we heard about the many struggles our members had then, and that many continue to have, to locate, and to afford, childcare as they returned from remote instruction to be back in schools in person.

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We lost a number of educators from the profession because they could not find care for their own children.

And this of course is true for many families other than families of educators.

As a nation, we should be ashamed of the little value we seem to place on quality childcare for all children, and especially on the little value we seem to give to those who care for them. Even though childcare providers are woefully underpaid, their services are still unaffordable for many working families, yet who could work without the reassurance that your children are well cared for?

LD 1726 has many components to provide a multi-prong solution to this urgent situation. It does have a very high fiscal note. But as the ads for a major credit card say, what is the cost of quality childcare for all families who need it? Priceless.

MEA has many priorities that we hope to see progress on in this session—raising the minimum wages for our educational support staff, increasing the minimum teacher salary, improving the pension for our retired educators. All of these priorities also have significant costs and are urgently needed to address the critical shortages of educators that our students need to learn and be supported.

Still, MEA encourages your support of LD 1726 and urges that we all work to keep moving forward to provide what all children and working families need and deserve.

¹<https://www.nosmallmatter.com/>