



DATE: May 10, 2023
TO: Committee on Health and Human Services
FROM: Samantha Warren, UMS Director of Government & Community Relations
samantha.warren@maine.edu / (207) 632-0389
RE: **Support for LD 1726, An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families**

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: On behalf of the University of Maine System (UMS), I am writing in support of investments in Maine's early childhood educator workforce, as proposed by LD 1726.

Our System is proud to be the state's largest producer of classroom-ready teachers, having awarded nearly 4,000 education degrees or certificates just in the past five years. Collectively, our six educator preparation programs have graduated 24 of the past 30 Maine Teachers of the Year.

It is with this tradition of excellence and experience in preparing thousands of talented Maine teachers and informed by the findings of our own independent Maine Education Policy Research Institute that **UMS supports State investment to increase teacher pay, including for Maine's early childhood educators.**

As we better understand the benefits of high-quality early learning on a child's development, we are also increasingly understanding the importance of preparing their teachers, through both classroom theory and hands-on practice in early learning settings. Research reinforces the positive correlation between the rigorous preparation and degree attainment of early childhood educators and the outcomes of their students, especially those who are at-risk.

Yet low wages mean too few are entering this important field and those who do are not pursuing the postsecondary education they need to best support their students' success and advance their own earnings and opportunity. For example, while enrollment in UMS education-related undergraduate degree and certificate programs has increased slightly over the last five years despite overall System enrollment declines, participation in those programs specific to early childhood education is down nearly 30%. The result: too many Maine kids are not receiving the high-quality early childhood regular and special education services they need to realize their full potential, and their parents are not able to fully participate in the workforce due to lack of access to affordable, reliable childcare.

Furthermore, more than one-third of the students at Maine's public universities are now over the age of 24. **As our System increasingly serves adults looking to advance their social and economic mobility through the proven power of postsecondary education, the inability to find and afford reliable childcare tops the list of barriers to enrolling, staying in school and completing a door-opening degree.**

Maine's public universities are on the front lines of this workforce crisis not just as the state's leader in education and educator preparation, but also as one of its largest employers.

In a pre-pandemic survey of University of Maine faculty with dependents, 32% of respondents indicated they have considered ending their employment with the university because of the conflicts between childcare responsibilities and work. At the flagship's childcare center, which mostly serves university employees, the current wait list has 203 children. The center has two assistant teacher vacancies, one of which has been open for two years and has necessitated us limiting enrollment below what our license allows to meet staffing ratios. Meanwhile, at the University of Maine at Farmington's early care and education center, which predominantly serves the community, there are 57 children on the wait list.

The directors of these two university centers report that the \$200 monthly wage supplements their employees have been receiving has bolstered workforce retention, especially given increasing costs of living and more competitive compensation available for Head Start and public PK-3 positions, as well as in retail and other sectors. They also noted that the stipend allowed some full-time early childhood educators within their centers to not have to work additional jobs.

For these reasons, **we urge you to further expand and make permanent these salary supplements.**

Your investment in this essential workforce will complement our own efforts within UMS. For example, this summer, UMF will reopen its nationally accredited Sweatt-Winter Child Care and Early Education Center at a new, larger location. Beyond providing local families affordable high-quality childcare, Sweatt-Winter gives UMF students majoring in early childhood regular and special education real-world learning and observation opportunities. Funded through a State bond, Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan monies and Congressionally Directed Spending (earmarks) secured by Sens. Susan Collins and Angus King, the expansion will enable the center to enroll more young children including, for the first time, infants and toddlers, and also allow UMF to expand enrollment in its early childhood education degree program that we hope will be in greater demand with the passage of LD 1726.

We are also in process of securing federal funding, also supported by Sens. Collins and King, to expand UMaine's center, with a commitment to reserve a portion of new slots for dependents of community members not directly connected to the campus. The success of both of these expansion projects is dependent upon our ability to recruit and retain early childhood educators.

Never has it been more apparent: **if we are to strengthen and grow our economy, we must also strengthen and grow our early childhood education workforce.**

Thank you for the opportunity to write in support of Maine's youngest students and those who prepare them for success. Please let me know if I can provide additional information on behalf of Maine's public universities in advance of your work session on this important legislation.