

Leah Richards  
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Dear honorable committee members, my name is Leah Richards. I live in North Waterboro, Maine and I am here to speak in support of Maine's early childhood education system. I speak to you as both a mother of a smart, spunky two and a half year old daughter, as well as a fourth grade teacher.

As a teacher, I have the privilege of watching children grow, learn, and thrive in my school and classroom. At the same time, I also see the struggles that many families face outside of school. One of the biggest challenges I encounter both as an educator and as a parent is the lack of affordable childcare options for working families. Too many parents are forced to make difficult choices between their careers, their children's education, and their financial stability.

Personally, I am deeply affected by the high cost of childcare. I pay \$315 a week to send my child to daycare. This financial burden is overwhelming and forces me to make sacrifices in other areas of my life. Like many families, I find myself juggling multiple expenses, and the cost of childcare is one of the heaviest. It's difficult to focus on my work, let alone plan for the future, when a large portion of my paycheck goes toward ensuring my child has a safe place to be while I am at work. Despite being a two-income household, money is still tight and we struggle to make ends meet. I truly don't know how single-income households do it.

For many families, the cost of daycare is a significant burden that eats up a large portion of their income. This leaves families in a constant cycle of stress, with parents working multiple jobs just to cover the cost of care. Unfortunately, this often means children don't get the early learning opportunities that could set them up for success later in life.

As an educator, I see firsthand the difference it makes when children come to school well-prepared and supported by stable childcare. These children have stronger emotional foundations, better social skills, and a stronger ability to focus on their learning. But when childcare is too expensive or unavailable, it negatively impacts not just the children but their families and communities as a whole.

Investing in affordable childcare is an investment in our future. When parents are able to access quality care at a price they can afford, they are better able to focus on their work, contribute to their community, and support their children's education. More affordable childcare will allow families to thrive, and ultimately, it will help build a stronger, more educated society.

I strongly urge lawmakers to prioritize affordable childcare and fair compensation for childcare workers so that all families, including teachers like myself, have the opportunity to give their children the best start in life without facing an unreasonable financial strain. Children are our future and it's only fair that we provide them with ample opportunities to learn, explore, and play at a fair cost to families.

I thank you for the opportunity to share my experiences, both as an educator and as a mother. I am more than happy to answer any questions you may have, and I truly look forward to seeing our government act in the best interest of families and children.

Warmly,

Leah Richards