

LD 210
Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee
Health and Human Services Committee
Joint Hearing
February 13, 2025
Testimony Submitted by Miriam Shark, Portland

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on LD 210. My message is simple. Cutting services to Maine's youngest learners is a mistake – educationally, economically, socially, in the short term and in the long run.

I urge you to reject the Governor's proposed cuts to state funding for Head Start, the Early Childhood Educator Workforce Salary Supplement System and the Child Care Employment Award.

I say this as a concerned Mainer and with the perspective of several decades focused on these issues, including a first career as a child psychologist, 25 years at the Annie E. Casey Foundation and, most recently, working with the national Campaign for Grade Level Reading which focuses early school success. I am also informed by seven years of service and current role chairing the board of Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI) (but am not commenting here on CEI's behalf).

I say this also aware that these committees, the governor and the entire state government are facing post-COVID funding cliffs at a time when its biggest partner – the federal government – has also become the most unreliable. That said, **I implore you not to make our youngest Mainers and their futures pay the price for the difficult fiscal balancing you must do.**

There are few areas of public policy with more evidence or broader agreement among more unlikely allies, from Nobel Laureate economists to business and military leaders to law enforcement as well as parents and educators than recognition of the value of investing in early childhood programs. Important in these challenging times, these investments have a long history of bipartisan support.

More than 20 years ago, Rob Grunewald and Art Rolnick, then economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, issued "[Early Childhood Development](#)" [Economic Development with a High Public Return](#)". They drew from research by Nobel Laureate James Heckman who has established "[as much as a 13% annual return on investment in terms of improved outcomes in education, health, employment and social behavior](#)".

Maine's kids are not on track to achieve these outcomes. According to the recently released [NAEP](#) scores, Maine fourth graders' math and reading skills are among the lowest in the country and are headed in the wrong direction. Maine's scores this year dropped more than those of any other state from pre-pandemic levels.

This means that we must work even harder to get more Maine children the early supports they need to start school with a strong foundation so that they can make academic progress once there. Failing to do so will make it that much harder to turn the curve on those results in future years, leaving yet more Maine children unable to fulfill their potential.

In addition to the economists noted above, the imperative of investing in early childhood programs is understood by Mission Readiness, an organization of retired admirals and generals who are alarmed by the fact that 77% of the nation's 17- to 24-year-olds are not qualified for military service, most often because they not academically prepared. [They note](#) that "decades of research have shown the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality early childhood programs for children's development, including addressing factors that can later disqualify youth from military service".

Similarly, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, an organization of police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors and other law enforcement executives makes the link between early investment and later outcomes in the title of their organization. In a [2022 Maine brief](#), they said "many kids are starting school too far behind and never catching up. If we want less crime in our state, we should invest upfront in early learning opportunities, rather than paying the high cost of school failure".

The same organization [addresses child care](#), saying that "federal and state policymakers must support investments in evidence-based policies that enhance the availability and affordability of high-quality child care, including addressing the needs of the child care workforce."

They understand that for people to succeed as both parents and workers they must be able to rely on safe, affordable childcare that is provided by well-trained, well-compensated staff. I am extremely proud of the Child Care Business Labs that CEI offers. These are adding to Maine's childcare capacity in high-need areas. But staffing remains an urgent issue across the state. That is why the Early Childhood Education Salary Supplement System is so critical and why reducing that program would negatively impact Maine children, families and businesses.

I close with a note of hope. The [Education Recovery Scorecard](#) released this week documents states and districts who have turned the curve and are seeing better outcomes. They have done so by making smart investments in their youngest learners. You have the opportunity to put Maine on the same path if you make wise decisions.