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Maine Equal Justice  
People Policy Solutions

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**Testimony on behalf of Maine Equal Justice on the child care and early learning portions of LD 210, *An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027***

February 24, 2025

Good morning Senators Rotundo and Ingwersen, Representatives Gattine and Meyer, and Members of the Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services. My name is Ann Danforth and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a Senior Policy Advocate at Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), a nonprofit civil legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

Maine Equal Justice has been active at the State House for over 25 years. Our work focuses on many of the issues that affect people's daily lives – access to adequate health care, housing, transportation and childcare; food and income security; and higher education and training. MEJ works in partnership with people living in poverty to organize and advocate together for equitable laws and policies. We also provide education and training throughout the state on programs and policies that directly impact individuals and families living with limited means.

**As your committees consider the child care and early learning portions of the Biennial Budget, I strongly urge you to reject proposed cuts to child care and Head Start programs, including investments that strengthen the early care workforce.**

Maine Equal Justice is a member of the Right From the Start coalition and also the convener of the Invest in Tomorrow initiative. Invest in Tomorrow is an initiative started in 2017 by Maine organizations, businesses and individuals to cut Maine's child poverty rate in half over the next ten years, while at the same time, strengthening Maine's workforce. Invest in Tomorrow's work is rooted in the belief that we all have a stake in addressing child poverty. Poverty challenges our schools, our health care system, our communities, our workforce, and our economy. Invest in Tomorrow envisions a world in which families can meet their basic needs to thrive and find gainful, sustainable employment, lifting their families out of poverty and setting us all on a better path. To that end,

we work towards promising policy solutions that will increase the likelihood that every Maine child gets what they need to have a fair shot at a bright future.

### **Quality, affordable child care and early learning is critical to helping Maine families enter and stay in the workforce.**

A shortage of quality, affordable child care and early education continues to be one of the most common barriers to finding and keeping a job for parents with low income. Around 72% of Maine children under the age of six live in households in which all parents are working, according to the most recent data available<sup>1</sup>. 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 face the significant barrier of affordability. According to the most recent Kids Count Databook, the average cost of infant care in Maine is \$11,700. When compared to other household expenses, child care can exceed housing costs and college tuition.<sup>2</sup>

### **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. They help set children on a path to success in school, leading to higher education and a career, with low income children and English learners benefiting the most.<sup>3</sup> Our state's future prosperity and workforce depend on our youngest children getting what they need to learn, grow, thrive, and become the adults who will strengthen our communities and build our economy.

Research shows the long-term benefits of quality, early learning experiences. Programs that begin at birth lead to better outcomes for children and yield up to a 13% annual return on public investment.<sup>4</sup>

For all of these reasons, we urge you to reject proposed cuts to critical investments that were made to the child care and early learning infrastructure in our state. These proposed changes include<sup>5</sup>:

- **Cuts to the Child Care Educator Salary Supplement Program**, which helps support the wages of child care educators. Currently, these educators earn an average of \$16.40 per hour, or about \$34,000 annually, which is not enough to sustain a family or attract and retain qualified staff. The Governor's proposed \$15 million annual cut to this program would reduce their wages to \$15.15 per hour, or \$31,500

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<sup>1</sup>

<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/2545,1095,2048,1729,870,869,36,868,867,133/any/11472,11473>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.mekids.org/site/assets/files/2024/2023\\_kidscount\\_databook\\_interactive.pdf](https://www.mekids.org/site/assets/files/2024/2023_kidscount_databook_interactive.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.srcd.org/policy-media/policy-updates/meet-ings-briefings/investing-our-future-evidence-basepreschool> and [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Building\\_Blocks\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Education\\_04202016.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Building_Blocks_Early_Childhood_Education_04202016.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.mekids.org/site/assets/files/2031/2023\\_kidscount\\_databook\\_interactive.pdf](https://www.mekids.org/site/assets/files/2031/2023_kidscount_databook_interactive.pdf) and

[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2892417](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2892417)

<sup>5</sup> Analysis of impact of cuts from Right From the Start coalition

annually, exacerbating the financial strain on these educators. These are below poverty level wages for a family of 4<sup>6</sup>.

- **Cuts to Maine's Child Care Employment Award**, which plays a vital role in attracting and retaining workers in the child care field. The tuition assistance program, which covers full tuition for those working in licensed child care centers, directly addresses the financial barriers that many workers face in an industry with low wages. Despite delays in its rollout, once the program became available, it proved highly popular, exhausting its funds within just three months and leaving an additional 400 professionals on the waiting list. The program is essential in making child care jobs more competitive and financially feasible, helping to stabilize the workforce and improve the quality of care for Maine's children. Eliminating this program would cause around 400 child care professionals to lose tuition assistance for their own children needing child care services.
- **Cuts to Head Start**, which provides critical early education and support for Maine's lowest income children and families. With the state's \$3.6 million investment, Head Start serves approximately 1,742 low-income children across the state. If funding were cut, about 180 children would lose access to these vital services, and the closure of up to 9 classrooms could be expected. Additionally, Maine's ability to access federal Head Start funds, which rely on maintaining 97% enrollment, would be jeopardized, resulting in the loss of millions of dollars in federal support. This would not only undermine the success of Head Start but also significantly harm Maine's lowest income children and families.

We hope you will reject cuts to these critical programs that have already proven to be meaningful investments for our state. Accepting these proposed cuts would harm families and undermine Maine's short and long-term economic growth.

Thank you,  
Ann Danforth

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<sup>6</sup> <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines>