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Testimony of Meredith Gutheinz before  
the Committee On Appropriations and Financial Affairs and  
the Committee on Health and Human Services  
in opposition to

**LD 210, the Governor's proposed Biennial Budget**

February 13, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, and Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Committees On Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services, my name is Meredith Gutheinz and I'm the Senior Director of Youth and Family Services at the Penobscot Bay YMCA. I am very concerned about the budget cuts to two critical initiatives that help stabilize the childcare sector by investing in our educators:

- Elimination of the Childcare Employment Award program (current investment of \$2.5 million per year) that helps childcare educators pay for their own childcare
- Cutting in half the Childcare Worker Stipends from \$30 million per year to \$15 million per year.

As both of these programs are currently utilizing all their available funding, these cuts would have a significant negative impact on our field. Our workforce is critical to providing safe, reliable, quality care for Maine children so their parents can work.

As the largest NAEYC-accredited and Quality Star 5 childcare provider in Knox County, the salary stipends have been essential in helping us attract and retain qualified employees. This support as allowed us to hire staff who might otherwise work in the school district as Ed Techs, or a store down the street—they choose to work with us because of the stipend, which helps make early childhood education a viable career option for them. If these stipends are reduced, our staff will lose a key incentive for continuing their education, and many may be forced to leave for higher-paying opportunities to support their families. This would have a direct impact on our ability to provide high-quality care to the children and families who rely on us. I have a teacher who just completed her Infant Toddler Credential—not only because she loves the work she does and is dedicated to providing high-quality care, but also because it helps our center maintain accreditation and a high-quality rating. Additionally, moving up the credentialing tiers would provide her with a higher monthly stipend, helping her support her family.

Balancing motherhood, full-time teaching, and multiple classes was a huge commitment, one she embraced wholeheartedly. Yet, on the very day she was awarded her certificate, the proposed budget cuts were announced. Instead of feeling proud and empowered, she felt deflated, questioning whether the sacrifices she made were worth it.

These cuts don't just affect numbers on a budget—they discourage dedicated educators who have worked tirelessly to grow in their field. If we want to retain passionate, skilled teachers, we must continue to invest in them.

The Childcare Employment Award program has been a vital support for our teachers, allowing us to retain dedicated staff who might otherwise have been forced to leave the field. As wages in other industries have increased, this program has helped us maintain a competitive edge to retain experienced teachers who might have otherwise had to leave for higher-paying jobs. We have one teacher who now receives the award and she can keep teaching and have her child at the same center instead of having to move to the public schools or stay home and care for her child until he can attend public school.

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Attracting and retaining a qualified early childhood workforce is an ongoing challenge, largely due to the sophisticated demands of the job versus low pay. Early childhood educators are responsible for caring for multiple infants and toddlers each day—they are teaching essential life skills, fostering emotional regulation, and laying the foundation for lifelong learning. They help children develop problem-solving abilities, build social-emotional resilience, and prepare for grade school—all while providing the nurturing care and structured environment that young children need to thrive. This work is highly skilled, deeply impactful, and far beyond mere babysitting—it is the foundation of a child's future success. Beyond the physical demands, this work is mentally and emotionally challenging in ways that are often overlooked. Our educators form deep relationships with both children and families, creating a foundation of trust and security that is essential for a child's development. Unlike other professions, there is no option for a "light" or "chill" day—staff must be fully present, engaged, and responsive because young children depend on them completely.

Yet despite the immense responsibility and skill required, early childhood educators continue to face low wages, making it difficult to attract and retain high-quality staff. Many talented educators leave the field for jobs in retail or other industries that offer higher pay with less emotional and physical strain. Without competitive wages and supportive programs, we risk losing passionate and experienced professionals, ultimately impacting the quality of care available to families in our community. When we post a job opening for early childhood educators, the response is drastically lower than for positions like front desk staff at the Y. Even more concerning, many of the applicants we do receive aren't qualified. We hire individuals who show a genuine love for children and invest significant time and resources into training them—only for them to now face the possibility of having to leave due to financial strain.

This constant turnover disrupts the classroom, the children, and the remaining teachers, who must take on additional burdens to train new staff—staff who, without proper support, may leave as well. Without continued investment, we risk losing skilled educators and further destabilizing early childhood programs that families rely on. Please help us retain our early childhood workforce and protect the future of quality childcare.

Anyone who chooses to work in early childhood education does so because they love it—because they are passionate about shaping young minds and supporting families. It's not just a job; it's a calling. The stipends and Childcare Employment Award program finally made early childhood educators feel seen and valued, allowing them to continue doing the work they love while supporting their own families.

In recent years, Maine has built incredible momentum around early childhood education, creating excitement and encouraging more people to enter the field. These budget cuts threaten to undo all the progress we've made. They will drive passionate, skilled educators away from the field, setting us back just when we were making real strides in strengthening early childhood education.

The pandemic was a wake-up call that early childhood educators are the workforce behind the workforce—without them, parents cannot work, businesses struggle, and communities suffer. Please continue to value and invest in these essential professionals so we don't lose the progress we have fought so hard to achieve.

These two programs are not just financial support; they are an investment in the future of childcare in our community. Without them, we risk losing experienced educators and limiting access to quality early childhood education.

[I urge you to oppose these harmful budget cuts.](#)

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