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LD 210

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Meagan Gagnon. I am a Preschool teacher and live in Old Orchard Beach.

I am opposed to the proposed \$15 million annual/\$30 million biennial cuts to the Child Care Wage Supplement Program. I have worked as a preschool teacher at an accredited center in Scarborough for 15 years. I truly believe that without significant financial assistance this industry will fail.

The childcare industry is not like other schools or businesses. The majority of centers are technically for profit because there are very few public childcare options, but it is not the type of business that creates much profit. There is no such thing as limitless growth- we can only fit a certain number of children in the building, resulting in a certain number of expenses. My center is one of the most expensive in Maine and we are still struggling. It is completely unfair and frankly impossible to expect Maine families to pay tens of thousands of dollars for care.

Even with the stipend we have been earning, childcare workers are still one of the lowest earning jobs in Maine. It also happens to be one of the most difficult jobs as well. Since the stipend has increased my center's turnover has somewhat plateaued, but we are still not able to find enough qualified staff to open all of our classrooms.

Childcare teachers work so hard. I have 20 children in my classroom (at a 10 to one ratio) of children ages 3-5. It is impossible to fully describe the scope of responsibilities we have, but it is a constant 10 hour day of juggling the safety, individualized needs, and education of 20 kids. Many non-educators imagine that we are simply 1 babysitters, entertaining children all day. That vision is false. We are helping children prepare academically, socially, and emotionally for kindergarten. We are maintaining safe, clean, and enriching environments. We are creating and implementing curriculum... my list could go on, but generally speaking we are creating a foundation that will follow each child we work with throughout their entire lives. Those children deserve to have qualified teachers that ensure the best possible foundation, and those teachers deserve to be paid a livable wage.

Beyond what we do for children, we are essential for our families. We are almost always open. We do not have summer vacations, we rarely have snow days, and if we were unable to stay open 120 families would struggle to go to their own jobs. That is just from one center. We are essential, and deserve to be recognized as such.

The stipend has helped to reduce some of the financial strain we feel, but it is still a huge challenge to live on an early childhood educators salary. If teachers cannot afford to work in this field, they will continue to leave it as they have been over the last decade.

Imagine where you would have been without the teachers in your life. Childcare workers are teachers, and we work with the most important and vulnerable ages in a human's life. We must ensure that all Maine families can afford to have their children learn from qualified teachers, and those teachers deserve a living wage. I cannot imagine a world without childcare and I hope you feel the same.