



February 24, 2025

**Testimony of Kathryn Soucy on behalf of Starting Strong before the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, neither for nor against 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**

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 Kathryn Soucy and I am the director of a coalition of organizations in Portland called Starting Strong. Starting Strong works to improve outcomes for young children and families in our community.

Over the past five years, Starting Strong has focused our efforts on increasing access to high quality early childhood care and education as a key strategy towards supporting the overall success of young children, their families and our entire community. Child care is a key driver of Maine's economy, enabling parents to fully engage in the workforce and contribute to economic growth. Reliable, affordable child care is essential for both families and the local economy, creating jobs and fostering community stability. We strongly oppose proposed cuts to child care and Head Start resources, as these will hinder economic progress and family well-being.

The Child Care Educator Salary Supplement Program plays a critical role in ensuring that early childhood educators can afford to continue their essential work. Currently, these educators earn an average of \$16.40 per hour (\$34,000 annually), which is far from sufficient to support a family. The Governor's proposed \$15 million cut would reduce their wages to \$15.15 per hour (\$31,500 annually), worsening the already significant financial challenges faced by these workers. This cut threatens to undo the progress the program has made in stabilizing the workforce, which has grown by 11% in just two years. Lower wages could drive qualified educators away from the field, further destabilizing an already fragile industry. With Maine losing an estimated \$400 million each year due to the lack of infant and toddler care, these cuts would have a devastating impact—leading to more closures, fewer available child care spaces, and greater challenges for working families.

Maine's Child Care Employment Award is also a vital program that supports the workforce by offering full tuition coverage for child care workers in licensed centers. This assistance helps to alleviate the financial burden of obtaining further education in a field that often offers low pay. If this program were eliminated, about 400 child care workers would lose access to tuition assistance, making it harder for them to afford their own child care needs while continuing their professional development. This would deepen the crisis of recruitment and retention in the child care field, leaving fewer qualified workers to care for Maine's children and further destabilizing the workforce.

Head Start, which serves 1,742 low-income children in Maine with \$3.6 million in state funding, is another program that would be severely impacted by cuts. If funding were reduced, approximately 180 children would lose access to vital early education and support services, and up to 9 classrooms could be forced to close. Furthermore, Head Start's eligibility for federal funding, which depends on maintaining at least 97% enrollment, would be at risk. If enrollment drops, Maine could lose millions of dollars in federal support, severely compromising the program's ability to serve the most vulnerable children and families. This loss would not only hinder the educational development of young children but also undermine the success of the program, impacting Maine's future generations and widening disparities in early childhood education.

Cuts to these programs would destabilize Maine's child care system. These programs are interconnected and essential for a stable child care system. Cutting any part of this system would unravel the progress made, harming families and threatening Maine's long-term economic growth.