

Honorable members of the AFA and HHS committees: I am writing this testimony in support of keeping the childcare provider stipends based on the MRTQ tiers rather than what has been proposed in Gov. Mills' budget.

In 1979, I started my career as an early childhood educator at minimum wage of \$3.10 per hour with a BS in Child Development and a certificate to teach K – 8. I chose to teach at the preschool level because I knew I could not work in public schools where educational teaching approaches and the environments for children K – 2 were completely inappropriate for young children's developmental learning styles. I was passionate about my field of work and believed it was one of the most consequential jobs I could do for the children I served, their future, and society at large. It was a hard lesson to learn that it would never pay me a livable wage. I received a 1% wage increase annually, regardless of my high performance reviews. By the third year of working in my career, my car was getting old, and I knew it would need to be replaced within a couple years. I wanted to build up credit, so I applied for a credit card at Sears. I was turned down because I didn't earn enough money. I settled on buying a 12-speed light weight bicycle to commute to and from work.

Financial pressures eased up a bit during the time I was married, but crashed in around me when I became a single mother with a one year old and a four year old. Working as an early childhood educator certainly wouldn't pay enough to afford childcare for two children and the bare minimum living expenses, so I opened a family childcare business in my four room apartment in the three unit apartment house that my then husband and I still owned. I shared the bedroom with my children and set up the childcare facility in the other three rooms. At the time of my separation from my husband, my car was five years old so I led an exceedingly thrifty lifestyle with the goal of saving enough money to buy a good used car because I doubted anyone would give me a loan due to my low earnings. I documented every expense for two years and to ensure I was saving as much as I possibly could.

Four years later, a residential home down the street came up for sale and my car was still running fine and in good condition. I had saved almost enough for the 20% down payment to avoid paying for mortgage insurance and only needed \$5000 from my father to cover the difference. I also needed my dad to cosign on the loan because my earnings were too low to qualify for a mortgage. I was 40 years old at the time. At this age, other professions would render an income and savings without needing to rely on a parent to buy a house. I graduated in the top 10% of my high school class and with a 3.4 GPA from college. I had dedicated over a decade to my career, saved money like a miser, and I still needed help from my father to buy a house.

I reopened my family childcare business in my new home with hopes that adding rental income from the apartment house would ease the financial strain. The numbers had looked better on paper than they did in reality because both houses had been built in the early 1900's and needed frequent repairs and updates. I was no longer living just above 220% of the Poverty Level but we were still struggling financially. I was working 60 – 65 hours a week in my business, managing a rental property, and still struggling to make ends meet as I single parented two children. My children were also becoming aware of how different their lives were from their elementary school-age peers. Turned out their friends weren't limited to just one full day visit to Funtown each year. My children deserved better. I began college courses in the evening to earn an MS in Pediatric Occupational Therapy.

In the years since I began working in early care and education, the wage level of early childhood educators has not changed. It is still on par with fast food workers. What has changed is the enormous body of research on the lifelong significance of the first five years of a child's life. And, with the development of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) capabilities, brain development and functioning could be studied like never before and without harming the subject.

We learned that a newborn baby is born with all the neurons they will have for the rest of their life, that 80% of brain development is complete by age 3, and 90% of brain development is complete by age 5. We learned that adverse living circumstances can prohibit brain development and cause lifelong detrimental effects. We learned that the number of words children hear and the number of vocabulary words they know by age 5 will determine their success in school. The research is very clear on the importance of providing educational environments for children from birth to 5 that encompass every area of learning in developmentally appropriate ways to ensure each child reaches their full potential. To do this, we need an educated staff. To keep an educated staff, we need to provide them with a wage deserving of the important role they fulfill. Keeping the current level of childcare stipends is the right decision for Maine's children, Maine's families, Maine's Learning Outcomes, Maine's high school graduation rates, Maine's economy, and Maine's future.

<https://files.firstthingsfirst.org/why-early-childhood-matters/the-first-five-years>

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/feb2014/the-word-gap>

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/new-research-ignites-debate-30-million-word-gap/>

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