

TESTIMONY NEITHER FOR NOR AGAINST

L.D. 437

AN ACT DIRECTING THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TO DEVELOP PILOT PROGRAMS TO PLACE CHILD CARE FACILITIES IN SELECTED SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS

March 19, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Eileen King, the deputy executive director of the Maine School Management Association, testifying on behalf of the legislative committees of the Maine School Superintendents Association and the Maine School Boards Association neither for nor against L.D. 437.

We fully recognize and appreciate the intent of this bill, which is to address the growing need for childcare services in Maine. Our local schools feel this challenge, as well, as we know many of our staff members are struggling to find any affordable childcare. This is statewide issue that is hurting our workforce and must be solved.

However, we must also acknowledge the increasing pressures placed on our public schools and educators. At a time when there is a strong call to return to the basics of academics, we continue to see legislative proposals that expand the responsibilities of our schools.

This bill, while framed as a study involving eight school districts, is, in essence, a step toward integrating childcare facilities into daily school district operations in many locations. Maine's Career and Technical Education (CTE) centers already offer childcare programs, providing students with valuable hands-on experience in early childhood education while also serving community needs.

Some Maine school districts have also already moved in this direction voluntarily. As a few examples:

- RSU 12, based in Chelsea, recently added a childcare program serving the children of staff members.
- The Falmouth School Department established a similar program more than a decade ago, with the superintendent sharing that the program, "provided a significant opportunity helping support our young teachers with the logistics, costs and stress of locating affordable, quality child care."
- The Easton School Department is now pursuing a similar model through a partnership with Aroostook County Action Program.

These are three approaches in three very different communities, from Cumberland County to northern Maine. If the legislature is looking to gather data on the effectiveness and challenges of implementing a comprehensive childcare approach in different communities, we would advise them to analyze these projects, instead of launching a large pilot project that could carry a substantial price tag.

Our members would also note that expanding this model would likely bring significant challenges that warrant careful consideration. Operating a childcare center within a public school district would require schools to hire additional staff who meet early childhood education certification and childcare licensing requirements. Schools are already struggling to hire the staff needed for the programs that they already have in place.

If childcare programs are incorporated into school operations, it will also require additional coursework in early childhood education to be offered at the high school level. This could necessitate hiring specialized educators, adjusting scheduling, and reallocating resources—further straining limited school budgets and personnel.

Those within the private childcare industry have also voiced concerns about the potential financial impacts on their own centers, if public school districts take on even more young children. The legislature should carefully consider these impacts before proceeding in implementing such a major project.

We acknowledge the need for solutions to Maine’s childcare crisis, and we recognize the important role that education plays in workforce development. However, we urge policymakers to also look at approaches that do not place the burden of childcare directly on public schools. Expanding partnerships with existing childcare providers, investing in community-based solutions, and strengthening CTE early childhood programs may be more effective paths forward.

Maine school board members and superintendents would welcome further discussions on any of these approaches, as we do hope to work with policymakers to seek solutions to help provide more childcare for our teachers, staff members, and our wider communities.