



Testimony in Opposition to LD 1689:

“An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission to Study Expansion of Public Preschool and Early Care and Education”

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and the distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Harris Van Pate, and I serve as policy analyst for Maine Policy Institute. Maine Policy is a free-market think tank, a nonpartisan, non-profit organization that advocates for individual liberty and economic freedom in Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in opposition to LD 1689.

At its core, LD 1689 seeks to expand government involvement in early childhood education by mandating that all new public elementary schools include areas for preschool instruction and child care, revising funding formulas to incentivize full-day preschool, and creating new bureaucracies and grant programs. While these proposals may sound well-intentioned, they represent another step toward a bloated government and greater dependency, rather than actual educational improvement or economic resilience.

First, government-directed preschool expansion is an inefficient use of taxpayer dollars. Maine faces numerous serious challenges, including declining enrollment in public K-12 schools and strained municipal budgets.^{1 2} Yet, this bill would dedicate more than \$5 million in General Fund dollars over just two years. Maine should not follow the example of states that have expanded expensive, centralized preschool systems with little return on investment.

Second, LD 1689 will crowd out private and community-based early childhood providers. Maine is fortunate to have a diverse network of private, faith-based, and home-based childcare providers.³ By expanding public preschool under the aegis of government schools, LD 1689 would diminish parents’ choices and impose a one-size-fits-all model. In states where public preschool has expanded aggressively, small childcare businesses have closed their doors, unable to compete with taxpayer-subsidized programs. Rather than encouraging diversity and competition, LD 1689 would consolidate early education under a bureaucratic monopoly.

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<https://www.mainepublic.org/education-news/2024-03-21/after-a-few-years-of-recovery-enrollment-in-maines-public-schools-fell-this-school-year>

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<https://www.mainepublic.org/education-news/2024-04-25/maine-schools-say-theyre-facing-a-perfect-storm-of-expenses-that-are-pushing-up-school-budgets>

³ <https://www.childcarechoices.me/>



Third, revising the funding formula to treat preschool like kindergarten opens the door to even greater unfunded mandates on local taxpayers. Preschool-aged children have different developmental needs compared to five- and six-year-olds.⁴ Furthermore, while other states have attempted to institute universal preschool systems before, they have frequently failed due to the policy concerns mentioned here. By aligning preschool funding with the existing kindergarten model, this bill creates fiscal pressure for districts to offer full-day preschool, even if local parents and taxpayers prefer more flexible or community-based arrangements. This is government overreach disguised as assistance.

Fourth, hiring more state-level early education "coordinators" is the wrong approach. The bill funds four new Department of Education staff positions, costing nearly \$1 million over two years. Maine has had a ballooning administrator-to-student ratio in the last two decades,⁵ yet Maine's rural communities do not need more bureaucrats telling them how to educate their youngest learners. They need flexibility, innovation, and trust in parents, not a new cadre of government supervisors.

Instead of growing government, Maine should empower families. We should prioritize initiatives that give parents greater flexibility, such as Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) for early education, tax credits for private childcare expenses, and deregulation of burdensome childcare licensing rules. These free-market solutions respect Maine families' autonomy and promote higher-quality, more affordable care.

For these reasons, Maine Policy Institute strongly opposes LD 1689. We urge the committee to reject this expensive, costly, and misguided approach to early childhood education. Thank you for your time and consideration.

⁴ <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2429&context=etd>

⁵ https://www.maine.gov/doe/sites/maine.gov.doe/files/inline-files/Analysis_EPS_Staff_Ratios_2019March.pdf