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Testimony on behalf of Maine Equal Justice in support of LD 1689, An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission to Study Expansion of Public Preschool and Early Care and Education

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Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Ann Danforth and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a Senior Policy Advocate at Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), a nonprofit civil legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

Maine Equal Justice has been active at the State House for over 25 years. Our work focuses on many of the issues that affect people's daily lives – access to adequate health care, housing, transportation and childcare; food and income security; and higher education and training. MEJ works in partnership with people living in poverty to organize and advocate together for equitable laws and policies. We also provide education and training throughout the state on programs and policies that directly impact individuals and families living with limited means.

I'm here today to testify in support of LD 1689, which will implement recommendations¹ of the Commission to Study Expansion of Public Preschool and Early Care and Education.

Maine Equal Justice is a member of the Right From the Start coalition and also the convener of the Invest in Tomorrow initiative. Invest in Tomorrow is an initiative started in 2017 by Maine organizations, businesses, and individuals to cut Maine's child poverty rate in half over the next ten years, while at the same time, strengthening Maine's workforce. Invest in Tomorrow's work is rooted in the belief that we all have a stake in addressing child poverty. Poverty challenges our schools, our health care system, our communities, our workforce, and our economy. Invest in Tomorrow envisions a world in which families can meet their basic needs to thrive and find gainful, sustainable employment, lifting their families out of poverty and setting us all on a better path. To that end, we work towards promising policy solutions that will increase the likelihood that every Maine child gets what they need to have a fair shot at a bright future.

¹ <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/10727>

Quality, affordable child care and early learning is critical to helping Maine families enter and stay in the workforce.

A shortage of quality, affordable child care and early education continues to be one of the most common barriers to finding and keeping a job for parents with low income. Around 72% of Maine children under the age of six live in households in which all parents are working, according to the most recent data available². We know that if these parents don't have access to child care, they can't go to work. In addition to the shortage of supply, parents face the significant barrier of affordability. According to the most recent Kids Count Databook, the average cost of child care for young children in Maine is \$11,700, or 19% of median household income³. When compared to other household expenses, child care can exceed housing costs and college tuition.⁴ These challenges are particularly acute for single mothers, as 27% of Maine mothers with young children are single parents.⁵

Quality child care and early learning helps set children up for success.

In addition to enabling parents to work, high-quality early learning experiences are important in their own right. They help set children on a path to success in school, leading to higher education and a career, with low income children and English learners benefiting the most.⁶ Our state's future prosperity and workforce depend on our youngest children getting what they need to learn, grow, thrive, and become the adults who will strengthen our communities and build our economy.

Research shows the long-term benefits of quality, early learning experiences⁷, with studies consistently showing that *public* preschool programs and investment in high-quality early care and learning increase school readiness and lead to improved outcomes for students and families.⁸

For all of these reasons, we urge the Committee to pass LD 1689, which will take the following important steps to improving access to affordable quality pre-k in Maine:

- Strengthen Maine's mixed delivery model, which increases access and choice and is especially important in rural areas.
- Incentivize school administrative units to provide full-day preschool instruction.

²

[https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/5057-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force?loc=1&loct=1#detalled/2/21/false/2545,1095,2048,1729,870,869,36,868,867,133/any/11472,11473](https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/5057-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force?loc=1&loct=1#detailed/2/21/false/2545,1095,2048,1729,870,869,36,868,867,133/any/11472,11473)

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https://www.stlouisfed.org/-/media/project/frbstl/stlouisfed/files/pdfs/community-development/child-care-fact-sheets/childcare-fact-sheets-allstates-us.pdf?sc_lang=en&hash=BEE2C7383F16E38DDAC7FC2A810376F1

⁴ https://www.mekids.org/site/assets/files/2024/2023_kidscount_databook_interactive.pdf

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https://www.stlouisfed.org/-/media/project/frbstl/stlouisfed/files/pdfs/community-development/child-care-fact-sheets/childcare-fact-sheets-allstates-us.pdf?sc_lang=en&hash=BEE2C7383F16E38DDAC7FC2A810376F1

⁶ <http://www.srcd.org/policy-media/policy-updates/meet-ings-briefings/investing-our-future-evidence-basepreschool> and https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Building_Blocks_Early_Childhood_Education_04202016.pdf

⁷ https://www.mekids.org/site/assets/files/2031/2023_kidscount_databook_interactive.pdf and

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2892417

⁸ <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/10727>

- Support facility expansion for birth–five services in a coordinated and community-based fashion.
- Create a unified early childhood educator credentialing framework and better align regulations, standards, and rules for early educators across settings.
- Provide funding for positions and grants to expand public pre-k across the state.

LD 1689 would move us closer to the state's goal of establishing an equitable, mixed-delivery public preschool system that provides universal access for preschool-aged children and their families.⁹

Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Ann Danforth

⁹ <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/10727>