



May 15, 2025

**Testimony of Katie Soucy on behalf of Starting Strong
In support of LD 1955: An Act to Increase Child Care Affordability and Early Childhood
Educator Stability**

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Katie Soucy and I am the director of Starting Strong, a coalition of early childhood stakeholders working to improve outcomes for children and families in Portland, Maine.

Starting Strong was founded over a decade ago to ensure that every child in our community enters kindergarten prepared to succeed. Our coalition includes child care providers, school district leaders, pediatricians, higher education institutions, housing agencies, funders, and family-serving nonprofits. Since 2018, we have focused our efforts specifically on strengthening Portland's early childhood care and education system—working across sectors to increase access, improve quality, and support the workforce that makes it all possible.

This testimony is grounded not only in our values but in our lived work on the ground. We've collaborated with local providers to develop cost modeling tools, supported citywide policy efforts, and convened families, educators, and employers to elevate solutions that reflect real-world needs. We bring a systems-level perspective and deep local knowledge—and from that vantage point, we strongly urge your support for LD 1955.

LD 1955 directly addresses two of the most pressing challenges in Maine's child care system: the affordability of care for families and the retention and compensation of the early childhood workforce. It offers a balanced set of solutions—investments in affordability, wage supplements, scholarships, apprenticeships, and direct financial support for child care professionals—that can move the state toward a more stable, equitable, and sustainable system.

Why this matters:

- More than 600 families in Maine are currently on the waitlist for child care affordability programs, highlighting the gap between what families can pay and what high-quality care actually costs.
- Child care is often the largest monthly expense for working families—sometimes more than housing or college tuition. The average annual cost for infant care in Maine is now over \$10,000, putting even basic care out of reach for too many.
- At the same time, Maine's child care educators earn an average of just \$16.40/hour, despite their work requiring deep expertise, emotional labor, and daily responsibility for young children's

health and development. Many live at or near the poverty line, with limited access to health care, housing, or child care themselves.

Maine's Child Care Wage Supplement Program has already demonstrated impact—resulting in an 11–15% increase in workforce participation and helping to stabilize programs that have long faced high turnover and burnout. But without sustained funding, this progress is at risk.

LD 1955 builds on this success by:

- Making the Child Care Employment Award permanent to ensure ongoing support for educators;
- Renaming it the Salary Sustainability Program to underscore its role as a consistent wage enhancement—not a temporary bonus;
- Requiring DHHS to create a sustainability plan and report on the funding needed to fully support eligible families;
- Expanding access to scholarships and apprenticeships for current and aspiring educators working in licensed child care programs;
- And ensuring that CTE early childhood instruction is available in every region of the state, creating clear and equitable pathways into the profession for Maine youth.

Importantly, many of these provisions—such as the expansion of CTE access and workforce development supports—come at no cost to the state, while others carry modest investments with high potential returns. The proposed \$1 million biennial investment in educator wage support, for example, is a small price to pay for a more stable workforce and a more accessible system for families.

At Starting Strong, we have seen firsthand how child care instability affects every part of the community—from employers who can't fill positions, to educators forced to leave the field, to families stuck on waitlists or making impossible choices between care and work. LD 1955 reflects the reality we hear every day: families cannot afford child care, and providers cannot afford to stay in the field.

This bill recognizes that affordable, quality child care depends on a stable, well-compensated workforce, and it takes meaningful, measurable steps toward that goal.

We are grateful to Senator Daughtry for her leadership in sponsoring LD 1955, and we thank this committee for your continued dedication to Maine's children, families, and early educators.

Respectfully submitted,
Katie Soucy
Director, Starting Strong

ksoucy@portlandconnected.org