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Maine Association for the
Education of Young Children

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Neither for nor against LD 2114: An Act Regarding Public Preschool Programs Serving
Children Who Are 3 Years of Age

I'm testifying neither for nor against LD 2114, An Act Regarding Public Preschool Programs Serving Children Who Are 3 Years of Age. While the goal of expanding access to preschool for 3-year-old children is laudable, I urge the Legislature to consider evidence from other jurisdictions demonstrating that public pre-K expansion — when implemented without robust equity guardrails and intentional inclusion of existing child care businesses — can have unintended negative impacts on the broader early care and education (ECE) ecosystem, including closures of community providers, loss of child care slots, and inequitable access.

In California, the expansion of Transitional Kindergarten (TK) — effectively universal preschool for 4-year-olds — provides a cautionary tale. A recent University of California, Berkeley study found that as public preschool seats expanded, community-based preschools shut down at an alarming rate — particularly in Los Angeles County. More than 150 child care centers closed, erasing approximately 12,000 child care slots in many communities and outpacing the number of preschool seats gained in public programs.

Because many small child care centers rely on revenue from 3- and 4-year-old families to remain financially viable, the diversion of children into free public classrooms created financial strain that many could not absorb, forcing closures or conversions to serve infants/toddlers — a shift that is expensive and impractical for many providers. Public programs inadvertently competed with and replaced these essential local providers.

This dynamic disproportionately harms family child care providers and small community centers that do not have the capacity or capital to pivot to other age groups or extended hours, threatening their sustainability while policymakers celebrate expanded preschool access.

New York City's long-standing Universal Pre-K and 3-K programs demonstrate both the promise and pitfalls of public preschool expansion.

While enrollment in public 3-K and Pre-K seats in NYC exceeded 100,000 in 2023–24, independent providers continue to face a financial squeeze. A recent report notes that the child care workforce earns among the lowest wages in the city and that the broader child care system remains patchwork and inadequately funded, even as public preschool expands.

In some communities, public provision does not fully align with family needs (e.g., extended day/year hours), which means private and community providers historically filled critical gaps that may now be eroding under universal programs.

Local reporting and community voices suggest that some operators feel pressure from public programs, where free seats can draw families away from licensed care that offers more flexible schedules or extended services — further shrinking viable enrollment for private centers. While anecdotal, these on-the-ground perspectives align with broader market shifts documented in California.

In Washington, DC, policymakers have tried to mitigate negative impacts by funding community-based partners alongside public school preschool.

The DC Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Program (PKEEP) channels public dollars to community-based organizations (CBOs) to provide free preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds outside the traditional public school system, helping preserve independent provider viability.

At the same time, DC has invested in compensation supports for the child care workforce through the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund, increasing retention and financial stability for providers serving younger and more vulnerable children.

However, DC's experience also shows that these supports are vulnerable to budget fluctuations — which can destabilize community providers if funding is threatened or reduced. Parents and providers in DC have expressed anxiety that PKEEP funding might not be sustained, prompting fear of closures or forced shifts to public slots that do not meet family scheduling needs.

LD 2114 correctly expands access for 3-year-old children — a vital step toward equitable early learning. However, the proposed model relies primarily on school administrative units and public program seats without explicit systemic supports or requirements to:

Ensure meaningful participation of community-based child care businesses and family child care providers in delivering services to 3-year-olds.

Align with extended-day and full-year care needs that traditional preschool hours often do not provide.

Protect the economic viability of providers outside the public school system, which are often crucial for serving infants and toddlers as well as providing flexible care for working families.

Without guardrails and targeted subsidy mechanisms similar to DC's PKEEP model — and without robust data collection and accountability on provider impacts — Maine risks falling into the same pitfalls seen elsewhere: public program growth that inadvertently shrinks the overall supply of child care and disadvantages small-scale providers.

To address these concerns and strengthen LD 2114:

1. Include Community Child Care Providers in the Funding Framework:

Require that a portion of the state's public preschool expansion funding flow directly to licensed community-based providers and family child care networks, ensuring they are equitably reimbursed for offering 3 and 4-year-old slots.

2. Support Extended-Day & Full-Year Options:

Incentivize providers (public and private) to offer extended-day/year services so that families do not have to cobble together multiple care arrangements.

3. Monitor Impact on Child Care Supply:

Mandate data collection and periodic review of how expansion affects child care supply and workforce stability statewide.

4. Workforce Compensation Supports:

Allocate funds for workforce compensation and recruitment incentives that level the playing field between public pre-K and private/community provider wages — similar to DC's Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund.

5. School District Partnership Requirements

Require school administrative units offering publicly funded preschool for 3- and 4-year-old children to make good-faith efforts to maintain at least 30% of their publicly funded preschool slots within licensed, community-based child care programs, including through superintendent agreements with licensed providers in neighboring districts when

applicable. A waiver may be issued by the Maine Department of Education only if a district demonstrates that it is unable to meet this threshold due to a documented lack of available licensed community partners that meet Chapter 124 standards.

6. Establish a Department of Early Childhood Education

Create a Department of Early Childhood Education to consolidate funding, policy, and oversight for early care and education from birth through age five under a single, coordinated structure. States such as Colorado, which established a Department of Early Childhood, offer a model for how unified governance can improve system planning, align funding streams, and support equitable implementation across public preschool, child care, Head Start, and early intervention services.

Public preschool expansion can be an important lever for education access and workforce participation for parents. However, without intentional policy design that preserves, rather than competes with, the existing child care infrastructure, these expansions can have unintended consequences that undermine the very families they are intended to serve.

I respectfully urge the Committee to incorporate strong guardrails to ensure community providers are included, supported, and sustained as Maine expands access for its youngest learners.