

Testimony of Katie Soucy on Behalf of Starting Strong
In support of LD 1799 An Act to Expand Maine's High-quality Early Learning and Care for Children by
Increasing Public Preschool Opportunities in Communities

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Katie Soucy and I am the director of a coalition of organizations in Portland called Starting Strong. Starting Strong works to improve outcomes for children and families in our community. I am also the parent of a four year old and a child care consumer. I'm testifying in support of LD 1799 An Act to Expand Maine's High-quality Early Learning and Care for Children by Increasing Public Preschool Opportunities in Communities.

Over the past four years, Starting Strong has focused our efforts on increasing access to high quality early childhood care and education as a key strategy towards supporting the overall success of young children, their families and our entire community. Our commitment to ensuring that children and families receive high quality early childhood care and education is based on research which points to the positive long-term success of such programming and the significant gaps which exist in Portland.

In 2019, Starting Strong worked with national consultants and key stakeholders from Portland - including Portland Public Schools - to design a strategic plan for pre-K expansion that met the needs of families who were most in need of services and underrepresented in existing programming. The result of this work was a plan which focused on equitable access for all families through continuing to develop Portland Public School's existing mixed delivery public pre-K model.

A mixed-delivery model for public preK— in which services are provided in a mix of settings, including community child care centers, public elementary schools, Head Start sites, or family child care homes—, is often seen as the gold standard by those in early childhood education. A key benefit of a mixed delivery public pre-K model is the ancillary opportunity it provides to support children beginning at birth. Leveraging investments in pre-K to support programs across the community in multiple settings strengthens the web of early care and education providers and offers parents and families clear benefits and best practices in early childhood education - including continuity of care from birth through age five, mixed-age group settings, before and after care for working families, and family choice. For communities, a mixed delivery model offers opportunities to efficiently maximize existing resources by utilizing existing buildings and spaces already designed for early learning, by leveraging existing early childhood care and education funding streams such as HeadStart and the child care Subsidy program, and by retaining developmentally appropriate practices and settings.

Despite these benefits, expanding access to public pre-K through a mixed delivery model is often difficult for communities due to a lack of support and technical assistance in bridging and aligning the two departments (DOE and DHHS) and sets of rules and regulations which have governance over this type of effort. LD1799 begins to provide communities with the much needed resources to undertake public preK expansion in a manner that supports the needs of young children, working families, and public schools. Thank you to Senator Vitelli for her effort and to this committee for your consideration of it here today.