



Maine Education Association

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Testimony

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
Grace Leavitt, President, Maine Education Association
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs
May 10, 2023**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Grace Leavitt. My pronouns are she, her, hers. I am serving as President of the Maine Education Association while on leave from teaching Spanish in MSAD 51. I have over 43 years of classroom teaching experience with 20 years as a National Board Certified teacher. The MEA represents nearly 24,000 educators in our Maine system of public education in pre-K-12 schools as well as in our institutions of higher education, both the University of Maine System and the Maine Community College System, along with students in teacher prep programs as well as many retired educators.

I am testifying on behalf of MEA 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.

Several years ago, the MEA Board of Directors voted to join the Right From the Start Coalition (<https://www.rightfromthestartmaine.org/>) as there was a greater awareness about the importance of the experiences our students had prior to entering our schools. For some time we had been seeing firsthand the impact of the inequities too many of our youngest children faced and the widening gap these caused in learning for many students in their later years. I also, as an individual, joined both the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children (MAEYC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). I learned much more about what Maine has, and doesn't have, for early childhood care and education, and both the critical need and the urgency to address this situation in our state. MAEYC made available showings of a documentary, "No Small Matter"¹, which I would encourage everyone to view if they are not very familiar with the importance of quality early learning and care. It's not that I wasn't already aware to an extent of the importance myself—I have two daughters and I was incredibly lucky that they were cared for by wonderful childcare providers, from infancy on through to their before and afterschool programs. These providers happened to have settings, programs, and practices that were comparable to what I viewed in the aforementioned documentary. How fortunate I was, as well as my daughters, that I not only could locate these providers, that they had space for my children, and that I could afford this essential care (though it was a struggle, even though the cost was reasonable and these providers deserved to be paid so much more!). But we should not leave it to luck for a child to have what all children need and deserve. We should be providing for all children, for all families, in all parts of the state, the kind of quality early care and learning that creates a solid foundation for further learning and future success and equal opportunity for all.

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In the years since MEA joined Right From the Start, Maine has seen much progress toward providing universal pre-K in our state. The grants through the Maine Department of Education for pre-K expansion have contributed in no small way to that progress. Yet more is needed to be sure we reach the shared goal of equitable access to quality early learning for all children.

One caveat—both the DOE grants and what LD 1799 could provide, when passed, allow for public/private partnerships. MEA of course hopes that in the future all of our public schools have pre-K programs as part of their programming, with space for all students and not limited to just a few that win a lottery. Again, we should not be depending on luck when it comes to doing right by all of our children, in all areas of the state. MEA is concerned about addressing inequities in what we provide for all students and also inequities in pay, benefits, and working conditions for the adults who teach and work with our children. Any such inequities are best addressed when pre-K is part of each public school system. But we fully recognize the challenges of pre-K being fully provided in our public schools at this time due to insufficient space, staffing shortages, and other difficulties, and the urgency of making good progress on our shared goal of universal quality pre-K is great.

Thus we urge your support of LD 1799 as we all work to keep moving forward to provide what all children deserve.

I thank you for your time and am glad to answer any questions.

¹<https://www.nosmallmatter.com/>

Grace Leavitt
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