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Testimony of Meg Helming before
the Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs
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**
May 10, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and honorable members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Meg Helming and I'm the COO of the YMCA Alliance of Northern New England, which represents the 15 YMCAs in Maine. I am also a parent of two young children. I support LD 1799 *An Act to Expand Maine's High-quality Early Learning and Care for Children by Increasing Public Preschool Opportunities in Communities*.

Collectively, the 15 YMCAs in Maine are the largest childcare provider in the state. We serve thousands of children in our early childhood education programs, before/after school programs, and summer camp. These programs provide children with safe, nurturing and enriching care, and are a critical component of our state's infrastructure to support working parents and our economy.

Many of my YMCA colleagues have submitted testimony in support of this bill from a childcare provider lens. Today, I stand before you as a parent of two young children, struggling to navigate a care system that simply cannot meet my family's needs. Due to systemic challenges in the early childhood education sector, I feel like I am counting down the days until my children turn five so they can go to public school and my husband and I can get out from under the financial and logistical burden of maintaining childcare. To be clear, I love my children's childcare provider, my kids are thriving there. But securing and maintaining the care has been incredibly stressful, and the cost is crushing. This isn't fair or sustainable for my family, or any of the families that are struggling at no fault of their own.

While the Department of Education shares on its website that 80 percent of Maine school districts offer public preschool, many of these programs are completely out of reach to families. For example, my school district, MSAD #51, runs a public pre-K program for 32 children per year – when the average number of students per grade is more than 160. The schedule is four half-days per week during the school year only. This is simply impossible for working families to manage. What this means on a practical level for my family is that we will pay an additional \$14,000 per child for an extra year of childcare in their existing program in a different town. This additional year of childcare is financially and logistically burdensome to my family.

The childcare system needs public investment to meet the needs of Maine families. LD 1799 would expand access to publicly-funded pre-K that better aligns with the needs of working families by leveraging the existing network of childcare programs across Maine. This is an efficient use of resources that also helps minimize disruption of care for children.

I urge you to vote ought to pass on LD 1799.

Respectfully submitted,

Meg Helming
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