



MAINE

**TESTIMONY BY JOEL MERRY, SAGADAHOC COUNTY SHERIFF  
AND MEMBER, FIGHT CRIME INVEST IN KIDS**

**BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEES  
ON EDUCATION AND 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**

Chairs Rafferty, and Brennan, and distinguished members of the Committees, I am Joel Merry Sagadahoc County Sheriff I am also a Past President of Maine Sheriffs’ and a member of the anti-crime group FIGHT CRIME INVEST IN KIDS, which is made up of 140 Maine law enforcement leaders I am also a father, grandfather and active community member It is my honor to testify in support of PreK expansion as proposed in LD 1799

I would like to offer the committees a unique perspective on high-quality early learning – its impact on crime I have been in law enforcement for my entire 40+ year career and I have seen how the lack of properly supervised activities can lead kids into crime-ridden environments

Government’s most fundamental responsibility is to protect the public safety There is no substitute for tough law enforcement But once a crime has been committed, lives have already been shattered Those of us on the front line in the fight against crime understand that we will never fix the crime problem solely through arrests and imprisonment We can save lives, hardship – and money – by investing in programs that can keep children from growing up to become criminals in the first place

Today I’m here to tell you that high-quality early learning programs are also a great crime reduction strategy

Many in this room know what the research tells us about what a critical time the first five years of life is for a child’s physical, emotional, behavioral and cognitive development

What is equally important, but less well known, is that quality early learning programs can also significantly reduce the chances of a child growing up to become a criminal

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## MAINE

Research clearly shows that high-quality early care and education for at-risk kids not only reduces their likelihood of committing a crime later in life, but also provides far greater savings than costs. A study of the Chicago Child-Parents Centers shows these facts. These centers provided school readiness programs to 100,000 preschoolers from some of Chicago's toughest neighborhoods over the course of 30 years. At age 18 the study examined outcomes for a subgroup of these children and matched those outcomes with a peer group of similar kids not enrolled in the Centers. The study showed that kids who did not receive quality early learning programs were **70 percent more likely to have been arrested for a violent crime by age 18**. By age 24 the now young adults who were in the Child-Parent Centers program as children were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail.

Most recently, an MIT study of the Boston preschool program found that enrollees were less likely to have been incarcerated in a juvenile facility during high school, compared to non-enrollees.

High-quality early learning and child care programs also save money. A well-respected, independent cost-benefit analysis of nearly 20 different studies showed that early learning programs can, on average, return a "profit" (economic benefit minus cost) to society of nearly \$27,000 for every child served, when cost savings from reduced crime are included.

Maine has made solid progress on increasing the option for voluntary Pre-K programming in various regions across our state in recent years, now serving about 50 percent of our 4-year-olds.

We know that across our communities there are more schools and community partnerships interested in adding public PreK programs, and I appreciate Senator Vitelli bringing this bill forward to help make more public PreK in a variety of settings a reality for more of Maine's youngest learners.

I encourage this Committee to unanimously support LD 1799.