

Richard A. Bennett  
Senator, District 18



3 State House Station  
Augusta, Maine 04333

**THE MAINE SENATE**  
131st Legislature

**Testimony of Senator Richard Bennett**  
**before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services**  
LD 1726, "An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families"  
May 10, 2023

Chair Baldacci, Chair Meyer, distinguished colleagues on the Health and Human Services Committee I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford, and I have the honor of serving 14 communities in Western Maine in the State Senate I am pleased to cosponsor LD 1726, "An Act to Build Maine's Economy by Supporting Child Care for Working Families"

Many of you may know that I serve as the Senate Chair of the Maine Children's Caucus, a position I've held for the past three years, along with my House Co-Chair Representative Rebecca Millett By design, the Children's Caucus is bipartisan and bicameral with the mission to improve the effectiveness and reach of policy designed to positively impact children from birth to age 8, their families, and the communities in which they live, in order to give every Maine child the right start in life, a safe and healthy environment, nurture their early learning, and enhance their well-being

Senate President Jackson's bill before you now, LD 1726, takes important steps to make that mission a reality For the purposes on my testimony, I am going to focus my remarks on the provisions in this bill that support the child care workforce, which, as we all know, is the workforce behind Maine's workforce

I came to the position as Chair of the legislature's Children's Caucus with very little background in early childhood, other than being a father of two children It's been a fascinating, and very timely, issue area to dive into

Earlier this year, the Children's Caucus hosted a panel presentation of child care workers, who shared with us their challenges, both during the pandemic, and since The Caucus hosted a similar panel three years ago My major take-away from these two sessions is that we, as policymakers, have failed this critical sector of Maine's economy

During the pandemic child care workers were **deemed essential**—and they are Just like first responders and medical professionals After all, first responders and medical professionals and so many other Maine workers needed child care workers to care for their children so that they could do their own essential jobs

When schools closed and parents needed to go to work, it was assumed that children could just go to child care programs No one asked about the programs' capacity, staffing, availability or needs It was an assumption—because the programs have always been there

The child care industry answered the call They adjusted to the new world of COVID, with often-changing and sometimes conflicting guidance, additional pressures, and even longer work days

Initially, there were no new resources to support them. Many went into debt. Some went unpaid. Yet, they were there to care for our children—because that’s what they do and that’s what they love. They felt an obligation to the children in their care, and an obligation to those children’s parents and families.

The other speakers here today will share more detailed data on the low wages paid to Maine child care workers. Last year the Maine Legislature and Governor Mills took a solid first step to address this issue when we approved a \$200 per month wage stipend for child care providers. That moved their average hourly wage from \$14.90 to \$16.05. As I said, it was a good first step. But more needs to be done to help make child care providers’ wages competitive. Think about how \$16.05 per hour stacks up against pay for current entry-level jobs in retail or restaurants. I encourage you all to support the provision in LD 1726 which doubles the monthly wage supplement to \$400 per month, which will then move the average hourly wage to \$17.20.

On this point I will just add that, according to a September 2021 report by the U.S. Treasury, **child care, as a sector, is the second-lowest paid in our nation.**

Without question, these past few years have made it undeniably clear how important child care is to the functioning of our economy. Parents have had to try to juggle child rearing and work simultaneously while businesses came face-to-face with the reality that, without reliable child care, parents can’t work. That connection between child care and our economy makes addressing parents’ barriers to high-quality child care a priority issue for business leaders. And it should be a priority to all of us as policymakers as well.

I want to thank Senate President Jackson for championing the issue of increasing wages for Maine’s child care workers, as proposed in LD 1726.

If every family were able to access the quality child care they need, regardless of where they live in Maine, we could increase workforce participation across the state and unleash great potential for economic growth.

That’s how important this investment is to children, families, the economy, and workforce attraction. Greater support for the fragile child care industry is the beginning of a strategic, targeted investment in quality early care and education for Maine’s youngest children that will shore up the foundation of our economy and pay dividends for years to come. Thank you.