

EDUCATE MAINE



The Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
Testimony from Dolly Sullivan, Program Director, Maine Teacher of the Year, Educate Maine

In Support Of
LD 2199 "An Act to Ensure Subsidy Reimbursements and Emergency Financial Assistance for Certain
Childcare Providers"

Tuesday, February 20, 2024 1 p.m. Room 209 Cross State Office Building

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, I am Dolly Sullivan, Program Director of the Maine Teacher of the Year Program at Educate Maine, a business-led education advocacy organization. I am here to express our strong support of L.D. 2199.

Educate Maine's mission is to ensure that Maine people are prepared to succeed in education and careers, and that all Maine people reach their highest educational potential. Investing in accessible, affordable early childhood education is critical if we are to give every Maine child a strong start in life. LD 2199 proposes to build upon the meaningful investments you and your colleagues made last year to support our childcare and early education system, in two specific ways.

One, to change the methodology of the childcare subsidy reimbursements so that they are based on child enrollment, not attendance – just as our public schools do. Two, LD 2199 creates a program to provide short-term, one-time emergency financial assistance to cover emergency facility or operational costs. Any financial assistance given would be backed up with technical assistance to support providers' financial planning and stability.

As additional background, Educate Maine is a founding partner of the MaineSpark coalition, which is working to support 60 percent of Maine people to achieve a degree or credential of value by 2025. The coalition has designated a Strong Foundation work group and policy goals focusing on the population birth to grade six, because we recognize the importance of investing early for long-term academic, career, and life success. Every dollar invested in early education pays dividends down the road: studies show that the return on investment in early education programs produces somewhere between seven and eleven dollars for every dollar invested, due to higher academic achievement, improved health, better economic outcomes, and reduced crime.

As a business-led organization, we hear from our employer partners regularly about the importance of early education from a business standpoint, now and into the future. Without adequate childcare, parents cannot participate in the workforce. Employers across Maine in all industries are struggling to attract and retain employees because the childcare situation is tenuous. There simply are not enough childcare slots to meet the immense need.

For example:

- More than half (61 percent) of Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce businesses reported that their employees are having trouble finding childcare.
- 75 percent of businesses cite childcare as the reason for unplanned absences; and
- Nearly half of businesses report childcare challenges as the reason that employees cannot return to work or return full-time.

Lack of childcare has become a drain on our economy. According to a 2023 report by ReadyNation, we could produce up to an estimated \$403 million more in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue for our state if parents have reliable, affordable care for their young children. *A vote for this bill is not only a vote of support for Maine's children and families, but also a meaningful investment in Maine's businesses and economic prosperity.*

From personal experience, we have two grandchildren under three and witnessed firsthand their parents struggles to find high quality, reliable childcare. They are in a great place now, but that was not always the case. We have received the 5 am "Bat call" to provide childcare when things went awry. Not every family has that option. And we need to be mindful of that. Several years ago, our colleague was told on a Thursday, that the daycare her twin 3-year-olds attended was closing – the next day. This is real world stuff.

We have been hosting statewide county focus groups talking to teachers about the recruitment and retention of Maine's educator workforce. Childcare (and housing) is mentioned in each group as barrier.

Maine cannot afford to lose more childcare programs, thus taking more working parents out of our current workforce. Both provisions in this bill seek to further stabilize our still fragile childcare sector. Educate Maine strongly supports the provisions laid out in this bill and we urge you to vote yes for LD 2199.

Thank you for your time.

Dolly Sullivan
Educate Maine
dolly@educatemaine.org