

Testimony of Rita Furlow
Senior Policy Analyst Maine Children's Alliance
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and
the Committee on Health and Human Services
on LD 210, the Governor's Biennial Budget
February 24, 2025

Good morning, Senators Rotundo and Ingwersen, Representatives Gattine and Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services. My name is Rita Furlow. I am the Senior Policy Analyst at the Maine Children's Alliance. We are a statewide non-partisan advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound public policies and best practices to improve the lives of Maine children, youth, and families.

We know from developmental science that brains are built from the bottom up, and that stable, responsive relationships with caring adults, and positive early learning experiences establish strong foundations for the brain's architecture.¹ Children who participate in high quality early learning programs in the first years of life develop the cognitive and social emotional skills that drive future success in health, school, and life. We know the learning and development that happens later in life is based on the foundations established in the early years and that smart investments during early childhood pay off not only for children and their families, but for taxpayers, as well.

I offer testimony today in appreciation of the many provisions of this budget that support the daily needs of children and families. We strongly support the preventative health care and well-child visits that are supported by MaineCare. We are pleased to see additional funding in the budget to provide mental health services for children. We appreciate the investment in evidence-based services such as the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership to intervene early to address challenging behaviors in young children that can disrupt their ability to participate in school and early childhood programs.

We urge you to reject proposed cuts to Head Start and child care

I would like to address two proposed cuts to this budget that will send us in the wrong direction as a state – cuts to Head Start and child care. We know that too many of our youngest children are living in poverty. Data from KIDS COUNT indicates that approximately 9,000 children under the age of five in Maine are living below the federal poverty level. In 2023, the poverty threshold for a family of four with two children was \$30,900.²

In order to participate in the workforce and support their family, parents must have child care. Yet the child care costs for two children under the age of six in Maine is between \$16,000 to \$24,000 a

¹ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). *Children's Emotional Development Is Built into the Architecture of Their Brains: Working Paper No. 2*. Retrieved from: <https://46v5eh11fhw3vc3ytpx9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Childrens-Emotional-Development-Is-Built-into-the-Architecture-of-Their-Brains.pdf>

² The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, CHILDREN IN POVERTY BY AGE GROUP IN MAINE, retrieved from: <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/5650-children-in-poverty-by-age-group?loc=21&loc=2#detailed:2:21,false:2545,1095,2048,1729,17,871,870,573,869,36/8121,18,122,12263,12264>

year.³ These high costs for care are why it is essential that parents living near the federal poverty level must have assistance paying for child care in order to work and support their family.

That is why we cannot cut programs like Head Start. The Head Start program is designed to provide comprehensive services for Maine's most vulnerable children with the highest needs – children who are homeless, in the child welfare system, or have a disability. Head Start's whole family approach works to ensure that children have access to nutrition, health/dental care, along with early education. The unique approach of Head Start is support it provides to parents. Family support staff support work with parents related to employment, higher education, parenting skills, and helping parents set and understand their children's developmental goals.

Head Start is a transformative program that changes the lives of children and their parents.

Supplementing federal Head Start with state dollars in Maine is not new.⁴ The Maine legislature started investing state dollars in the state's Head Start programs in September of 1984 during a special session of the Maine Legislature with an allocation of \$1.7 million.⁵ The funding was a result of a state commission on education that met during 1983-84. In June of 1984, the Commission issued its report, Education: Maine's Most Important Investment. Of the 22 recommendations from the report, the fifth recommendation was as follows:

"We recommend that the Department of Educational and Cultural Services (DECS) and local school systems place a high priority on better preparing children during their earliest years of schooling.

In particular, we recommend that:

- *the DECS develop a standard screening and assessment program that will allow schools to place pupils in grades K-3 according to their readiness;*
- *the Early Childhood Education Plans program be expanded, at an annual cost of \$250,000, to accommodate the interest already expressed by school officials in developing K-3 readiness programs; and*
- *the federally-funded Head Start program be expanded with State appropriations at an annual cost of \$2.1 million, to serve at least 20 percent of Maine's eligible children.*

1985 Maine Head Start Funding		
Federal Funding	Maine State Funding	Total Funding
\$4,058,313	\$1,662,500	\$5,720,813

By 1997, \$ 2,317,294 million was being invested in Head Start from the general fund. In 2001, the tobacco settlement funds, the Fund for a Healthy Maine, began an additional investment of state

³ Childcare Prices as a Share of Median Family Income by Age of Children and Care Setting 2022, United States Department of Labor (2022), retrieved from: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/topics/childcare/median-family-income-by-age-care-setting-2022>

⁴ Weil, Jane. One Third More: Maine Head Start Expansion with State Funds. (1986) Fel-State Partnership Project, Action Opportunities, Inc.,

dollars into Head Start and other early childhood program. A national report in 2008 and 2012 highlighted Maine's state investment to support the Early Head Start program.⁶

We also ask that you reject the Governor's proposal to drastically change the Fund for a Healthy Maine. These provisions would move funding for Head Start out of the Fund into the General Fund where they will be more vulnerable to cuts.

This is not the time to cut effective programs that are working for vulnerable children and their families.

Language not included in the Supplemental Budget

We request that members of the Committees clarify the status of funding that was allocated in 2023 and 2024 for the Maine Child Care Affordability Program. If this language is not included in the supplemental budget, what is the status of this funding? This money was intended to provide immediate relief to families to help them pay for child care. Further delays to implement access to this program is unacceptable. When will it be made available to Maine families? OCFS now has a waiting list of several hundred parents waiting to access the child care assistance through the Child Care Affordability Program. We request that the Committees clarify the status and availability of this funding and fix any technical issues blocking implementation of this funding that has been allocated by the Legislature. See Part N from the Supplemental budget below:

PART N

Sec. N-1. 22 MRSA §3731-A, sub-§1 as enacted by PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. RRR, §1 is amended to read:

1. State funding to support eligible families. Other Special Revenue Funds and General Funds allocated for the purposes of supporting the Maine Child Care Affordability Program may be used to support any eligible family.

Child Care Wages

Child care is a critical need for families in our state. Access to child care depends on educators. Providing a living wage to these educators is critical to making a child care system work. The child care legislation that has been passed by the Maine legislature over the past several years is part of a careful plan to create a system that will work for children, families, and educators. The elimination of \$15 million to support early childhood educators is devastating to the mostly women who are educating and caring for our children across the state. These women simply cannot afford to stay in low-wage jobs as they face higher costs to pay for housing, food, utilities, or student loans. The child care salary supplement program is working. It is keeping and attracting educators to stay and join this field that desperately needs staff so that parents can go to work.

We urge you to reject all of the Governor's cuts to early childhood education and instead join us to continue the investment that began in 2021. Too many children, parents, and educators will be harmed by these cuts. Maine is on the cusp of creating a better system. I would remind you that in

⁶ Maine: Early Head State Initiatives, Center for Law and Social Policy and ZERO TO THREE (2012).

2023, the Legislature set out as part of language in the budget and “Affordable child care plan.” The members of the Right from the Start coalition believe that we can work together with the Legislature to create a child care system that works for everyone – children, families, business, and educators. Please reject these cuts and instead work with us to continue to build a system that works for everyone.

Thank you for your consideration.