

## Testimony regarding the Governor's Proposed Budget

Colleen J. Quint  
Chair, Children's Cabinet Early Childhood Advisory Council  
Portland, ME  
February 24, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine and members of Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs. Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony with you.

My name is Colleen Quint and I chair the Children's Cabinet Early Childhood Advisory Council (CCECAC). The CCECAC is a legislatively-established Council that focuses on the implementation of early childhood policy and programming and serves as the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care. As its name implies, the Council advises the Children's Cabinet on a range of issues related to early childhood and works to ensure statewide coordination and collaboration among the wide range of early childhood programs and services in the State, including child care, Head Start, IDEA preschool and infants and families' programs, and pre-kindergarten programs and services. Its members include legislators, parents, child care providers, philanthropy, business and organizations that advance the well-being of children. A list of the current CCECAC members is attached to my testimony.

I offer this testimony today on behalf of the CCECAC to express opposition to and raise awareness of its concerns regarding several provisions in the Governor's proposed budget – particularly those impacting salary supplements and child care subsidies for the early childhood workforce, as well as a retrenchment of Head Start funding by the state. And I do so with a keen understanding of the budget challenges facing the state and with respect for the need to prioritize prudently among many needs.

Maine has made strong strides in early childhood in recent years – in some cases aided by federal dollars, in others with state investments. Those investments were needed before and are still needed now. Even with the infusion of resources, we are not out of the child care crisis. These investments matter and have had positive outcomes not just for the early childhood workforce, but for providers, for families and most importantly for children. We have heard directly from providers and from families about the negative and real-world impacts of these cuts on children, parents, staff, providers and employers. The CCECAC shares their concerns.

Developing and retaining a quality early childhood education (ECE) workforce is paramount. The pandemic highlighted how critical it is to working families to have quality, affordable child care – and how precarious these programs are. The ripple effect of programs that closed because they lost staff, or couldn't make ends meet financially, were real. This is the workforce behind the workforce. Quality programs support children's health, safety and development. Participation in quality early childhood education improves academic, employment and income outcomes, boosts home ownership, and leads to more positive health outcomes. And it decreases the likelihood of needing social services. Quality, affordable programs also ensure parents' workforce participation. Early childhood education is as much infrastructure as bridges and roads – we don't function without it. But wages for early childhood educators are at the bottom 3% of all US occupations. Mean pay in Maine is \$16.41 an hour – less than someone can earn working at Walmart.

If we remove or retract the important investments that Maine has already made, it will only exacerbate challenges to attract and retain staff...which will in turn also negatively impact providers and their own sustainability. If they can't recruit and retain staff, then they can't fill the slots in their program and in many cases those costs will be passed along to families for those slots that do remain. And for some families the cost will be more than they can take on, and their workforce participation will be disrupted.

The Council is deeply concerned that cuts in multiple places will unwind the progress and momentum that has been made as a field. And these proposed cuts are demoralizing for a workforce that is already difficult to attract and retain. ""For the first time, my employees have felt seen - we've been talking about [these kinds of investments] for so long and they actually did it and it made my staff feel pride in their work and recognition for the hard work and professionalism ... and now we're sliding back and it breaks my heart. [Now people think] we didn't need it and it doesn't matter," said one provider. But we do need it, and it does matter. We've made important progress, but are far from done. Moving backwards will have significant effects on the workforce, on providers, on parents and their employers. And on children.

Allow me to speak to three specific provisions in the proposed budget that are of highest concern to the Council:

First, the **proposal to revert the ECE salary supplement back to 2022 levels**. The reality is, reverting back to \$15m for salary supplement is more than a reversion to prior supplement levels, because more people are now participating in the program and have elevated their professional development – which is what we want to see, but now everyone will receive less because the \$15m will be spread thinner. This will negatively impact recruitment and retention. These salary supplements are not bonuses, they are funds that help people make a more livable wage and which keeps providers from having to pass that cost onto families. It will impact quality, availability of child care slots and sustainability for providers. The ECE workforce increased by over 1,000 when the salary supplements went into effect. Not only did the field gain workforce, but would have lost more. Cutting salary supplements back to the 2022 levels will lead to significantly lower stipends at all three tiers and less than \$200 for the lowest tier. We are already hearing about some staff planning to leave to go work at WalMart because wages will be back down below what some of bigger chain stores paying now pay for entry level.

Second, the **elimination of child care employment subsidy (CCEAP)**. This resource has helped many in the ECE workforce access care for their own children. Again, this will negatively impact recruitment and retention – and program sustainability. The Child Care Employment Award allows family child care owners to access tuition support which federal dollars do not allow. It is not redundant. It threatens to eliminate subsidy availability completely for family child care program operators. Family childcare operators are not eligible for federally funded CCAP when they provide care for their own children and so that group would be missing out if this is eliminated. Stipends and the employment award go hand in hand. The employment subsidy award bumps up available income for families to pay for heat and electricity and food – if paying half of the fee for child care the other half not needed there is now available to meet other urgent family needs

Finally, the **proposal to limit the increase in funding for Head Start expanded eligibility**. This is a triple whammy for Head Start programs. The flexibility of the \$3.6m last year was really helpful, especially with changes in Head Start performance standards. Not only would a loss of funds from the salary supplement and the child care employment subsidy impact recruitment/retention of the Head Start workforce, this retrenchment of investments would also lead to fewer eligible children and fewer slots. And, it could have ripple effects on other Head Start Programming. The cut in state support could mean programs will

struggle to be fully enrolled, which in turn means then programs will be at risk of losing federal dollars as well and having to close even more classrooms. This will also take high quality early childhood education programming away from children with low income and beneficial supports for the entire family. We are concerned about losing this safety net for kids and families. The expanded state funding allowed programs to add much-needed classrooms to serve more children. The equity issues are real. Maine still only reaches 12% of children who are eligible. What is needed is more funding, not less! This could also impact the success of public pre-K expansion, where local Head Start programs are often critical partners. It can take years to develop collaborations. If Head Start funds are cut, then comprehensive services could be cut in that school that maybe took several years to evolve.

Before concluding, it is worth noting that pulling back on these investments will have ripple effects that risk other investments made by the state in the early childhood space. Investments made by the state in early childhood apprenticeships, the developing of an 081 preschool certificate by MRTQ, and continued expansion of Pre-K credentialing all are potentially (and negatively) impacted if these workforce investments are curtailed. The workforce will revert back to being significantly underpaid for the work they do for our youngest citizens (who are not enfranchised and so must rely on the enfranchised to look out for their well-being). And with lower stipends at all of the tiers, the workforce will no longer have an incentive to gain greater degrees and certificates.

Parents have shared with us the very real impacts on their own workforce participation and educational advancement when they struggle to find child care. They have to cut back on their hours or even leave their jobs (often losing benefits when they do). They have to stop their own educational pursuits, preventing advancement both professionally and financially. Kids' needs are not being met and the long wait lists for slots puts many parents in a holding pattern. Lack of stability in the field means that children don't always have consistent care – and consistency is critical for development. And we have heard about older siblings being absent from school to care for younger children so their parents can work. The whole family feels it when childcare is not available.

The burdens on families are real – and all of this is with these new supports and resources in place. Positive strides have been made, but it is clear much more needs to be done. Moving backwards is the wrong direction – for everyone.

## **Members of the Children's Cabinet Early Childhood Advisory Council:**

### **Two Members of the Maine Senate**

- Working with Senate President's Office on Appointments

### **Two Members of the House of Representatives**

- Working with Speaker's Office on Appointments

### **One person representing parents of young children:**

- Janelle Surace, Educare's Parent Ambassador Program

### **Two persons with experience in public funding and philanthropy:**

- Jennifer Beck, Senior Program Associate, John T. Gorman Foundation and Chair of the Early Childhood Funders Group
- Colleen Quint, President and CEO, Alfond Scholarship Foundation

### **One person representing child abuse and neglect prevention:**

- Dana-Michelle LaPlante, Care Manager, The Aroostook Medical Center

### **One person representing postsecondary education:**

- Donna Karno, Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education, University of Maine, Farmington

### **Three persons representing statewide, membership or constituent organizations that advance the well-being of young children and their families:**

- Annie Colaluca, Director of the Enrichment Preschool Program at the Bath Area Family YMCA on behalf of Maine AEYC
- Sue Powers, Head Start Director at Aroostook County Action Program, Presque Isle on behalf of the Head Start Association
- Rita Furlow, Maine Children's Alliance

### **Two persons representing family child care providers:**

- Chrissie Davis, Bouncing Bubbles Child Care, Skowhegan

- Sasha Shunk, Shunk Child Care, Portland

**One person representing a business roundtable on early childhood investment:**

- Jeremy Fischer, Leadership Team member, Maine Early Learning Investment Group

**One person with expertise in children's health or public health:**

- Samantha Dunn, DO, a Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrician, Maine Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics