

**TESTIMONY BY TRACYE FORTIN
BEFORE THE
APPROPRIATIONS &
FINANCIAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

*Educare Central Maine
Governance Board:*

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Chairperson
Drummond Woodsom*

***Peter Hallen**
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Waterville Public Schools*

***Suzanne Walsh**
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Buffett Early Childhood Fund*

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***Samuel Hight**
Hight Family of Dealerships*

***Rabbi Rachel Isaacs**
Educare Former Parent
Colby College*

***Pamela Thompson**
KVCAP Board of Directors*

**LD 210 An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the
General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government
and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper
Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years
Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027**

Good Afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Tracye Fortin and I am the Chief Operating Officer of Educare Central Maine and Kennebec Valley Community Action Program Child & Family Services.

I have worked in early childhood for my entire career, including family childcare, hospital birthing units, Head Start, Child Care, and inclusionary partnerships, Higher Education, and Educare's national research model, of which Maine is fortunate to be a partner since 2010.

Our communities, our state and our country realize now more than ever before that childcare access and quality are paramount to a healthy economy, so clearly highlighted with the pandemic. This has been known to the early childhood field for years from research-based evidence, and immediately rose to one of the top two community needs of families, alongside housing, recognized by business leaders, public educators, government officials, and community members. We applaud the recognition that child care is everyone's business and the investments to create an equitable, accessible, quality, affordable system must continue. The collective 'we' cannot take a step backward.

The plethora of data regarding children: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), Child Abuse & Neglect rates, disabilities and behavioral challenges, hunger, foster care, and grades 3 and 8 reading and math scores respectively paint a picture of significant need. These are Maine's children and these are Maine's future workforce. Today's employers are struggling to hire and Maine does not have enough high quality early care and education educators or placements to meet the need to allow for workforce entry or employment retention. We must support educators and we must support families and their young children. Our economy counts on this!

I personally can relate to the challenges of poverty and of parenting. Did I get my resilience from being a Head Start child in 1966? Was it because my divorced mother of four children became active in Head Start Parent Engagement and Leadership and modeled resiliency? Was it because I swallowed my pride as a young divorced mother of three children and sought supports of food stamps and heating assistance for one year, applied for scholarships and aid to attend college, eventually chose to work in Head Start? I know what poverty is firsthand and I know that the supports take a village of caring and trained professionals, and systems to impact change. I own my story, and I have engaged with countless families who have benefited from Head Start's comprehensive services and child care and Educare partnerships.

Investments in early care and education make a lasting difference. They address barriers and truly break generational poverty. My five children are highly educated and give back to the community; I am the proud mother of a lawyer, an emergency room physician, a nurse (who saved infants lives and risked her own during the Colorado fires evacuating the NICU), a Dana-Farber cancer research business analyst, and a criminal justice advocate.

I implore you to not cut funds in Head Start or in Child Care. Early childhood educator's average hourly wage is \$16.40 and will reduce to \$15.15 if the budget salary supplement reduction moves forward. This is not an income that is even a livable wage, nor one that will attract educators to work with our youngest learners when infant/toddler and preschool brain development is at its optimal stage. The domino effect negatively impacts all sectors of society. Our children, our families, our businesses, our schools, our communities need Maine's investment for today and for the future. The outcomes speak volumes and the research validates the return on investment. We must continue forward movement on the Governor's Economic Recovery Plan to sustain and grow Maine's economy, recognizing quality child care is an economic development issue.

Thank you for your time.

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