

Good morning/afternoon Senators Rotundo & Ingwersen, Representatives Gattine & Meyer, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and the Health and Human Services Committee.

My name is Jennifer Burns. I serve as Head Start Director at The Opportunity Alliance in Cumberland County. We are responsible for over 100 families and 50 staff members. These individuals and collectives are deeply committed to a high-quality early learning experience. They have committed their lives, and their children's lives, to the clear impact of preK teaching as the best way to meet children's developmental needs to set them on the path to their potential.

Head Start and Early Head Start provide positive experiences that support the healthy development of children in all domains and engage parents as learners and as the primary teachers of their children. Our programming impacts not only the individuals but is fundamental to Maine's economy. I am here today to strongly oppose the proposed cuts to childcare funding in Governor Mills' 2026-2027 biennial budget. These cuts would be devastating for working families, our economy, and Maine's future workforce.

To understand how devastating the proposed cuts would be, we need to acknowledge the positive impact the funds we are imagining cutting have had for Head Start children and staff. Last fall an employee told me that because of the Child Care Employment award, her family was experiencing financial stability for the first time ever. This is a direct consequence of the employee stipend. Hiring staff is the most significant challenge we have in serving children and families, so resources to keep our talented staff make all the difference. Due to the teacher stipend, turnover in classroom teachers is currently lower than it has ever been. CCAP funds are supporting 12 families to be in the workforce through accessing both a Head Start classroom and childcare for extended hours.

At a time when federal Head Start funding is at risk, now more than ever, we cannot afford to cut early childhood education (ECE) funds from Maine's state budget. We are struggling with rising costs, workforce shortages, and long waitlists – reducing funding will force more closures and make affordable childcare even harder to find.

I urge this committee to reject these cuts and protect childcare funding in the state budget.