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*Testimony of Rep. Cheryl Golek introducing*  
**LD 437, An Act Directing the Department of Education to Develop Pilot Programs to Place Childcare Facilities in Selected School Administrative Units**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs*

Sen. Rafferty, Rep. Murphy and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Cheryl Golek, and I represent District 99, which includes Harpswell and part of Brunswick. I am proud to present to you all **LD 437, An Act Directing the Department of Education to Develop Pilot Programs to Place Childcare Facilities in Selected School Administrative Units**.

This bill takes a proactive step towards addressing the critical need for childcare in Maine by directing the Department of Education to explore the feasibility of integrating childcare facilities into public schools. This initiative aims to develop and implement pilot programs based on comprehensive research.

The challenges faced by Maine families in accessing quality childcare and the difficulties providers experience in retaining staff are issues that deserve our urgent attention and constructive solutions. The necessity for childcare options in our state is increasingly apparent. Our childcare providers are essential to building a strong workforce and supporting our economy. The complexities of the childcare crisis in Maine -- ranging from inadequate pay to workforce shortages -- are significant.

For many parents, finding affordable and accessible childcare is crucial for re-entering the workforce or pursuing further education. A report from the Council for a Strong America revealed that 141 childcare providers around Maine closed permanently during the pandemic, and many more closed temporarily. Those that did reopen have often reduced their capacity due to difficulty finding workers.

High costs and limited access to affordable childcare significantly impact parents' ability to work, affecting economic growth and financial stability for families.

According to a 2023 report by the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC), Maine does not have enough licensed childcare slots to meet the needs of young children. Notably, Aroostook County faces a substantial gap, with 2,561 children requiring care but only 565 slots available. This gap exists across all counties in the state, highlighting a pressing need for increased services. Furthermore, all counties across the state face a gap between the available services and the number of children that need care.

Notably, the BPC analysis did not account for additional gaps caused when childcare providers cannot operate at full capacity due to challenges with staffing – the true numbers are likely more dire.

The economic repercussions of the childcare crisis have dramatically escalated since the pandemic, amounting to an estimated \$122 billion annually in lost earnings, productivity and revenue nationwide. In Maine, the lack of childcare specifically for infants and toddlers costs the economy approximately \$403 million each year, more than double the 2019 estimate of \$180 million. Clearly, our childcare providers are vital to our workforce and the overall economy.

This bill has the potential to enact meaningful change in Maine's childcare landscape. It sets forth several important goals:

It aims to establish training centers to help students learn about early childcare development and the developmental stages of infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Such programs provide valuable early childcare education experiences that can lead to certificates at graduation or count toward further education in this vital field.

The bill emphasizes the importance of providing nurturing, high-quality childcare and age-appropriate learning experiences in safe and secure environments. Investing in early childhood education can foster upward mobility for all children, equipping them with the foundational skills necessary for long-term success. The benefits extend beyond individual children, positively impacting their families and communities for years to come.

I would like to highlight five important benefits of quality childcare, and their lasting positive impacts:

1. Research shows that access to high-quality early learning programs can significantly reduce educational and opportunity gaps between children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds at the time of kindergarten entry, with readiness being a key predictor of academic success.
2. Children enrolled in quality early learning programs tend to have higher graduation rates, with a 6% increase in high school graduation and a 5.5% increase in college attendance rates being linked to their participation.
3. Adults who receive quality early childhood education are more likely to be employed full-time, become homeowners and maintain savings accounts.

4. Participation in high-quality early education programs is associated with long-term health benefits, including lower rates of depression, reduced alcohol and tobacco use and decreased prevalence of cardiovascular diseases.
5. Evidence suggests that early childhood education enhances parenting practices, benefiting children during the program and in later years.

This bill also seeks to effectively tackle workforce shortages in our school districts, which currently face shortages across various roles, including teachers, educational technicians, food service workers, maintenance staff and bus drivers. By offering quality childcare as an employee incentive, we can boost recruitment and retention, addressing critical workforce gaps.

Moreover, this bill is poised to strengthen the private childcare sector by creating a pipeline of skilled early childhood education workers. With over two-thirds of children under age six (about 51,000 children) affected by the current childcare challenges, improving access and availability is crucial for supporting parents and fostering a stable future for our workforce.

Parents need access to reliable, affordable childcare to stay in the workforce, but challenges with affordability, availability, the childcare workforce and care quality leave parents with a lack of viable options. The lack of accessible childcare forces many parents, especially women, to reduce their work hours or leave the workforce entirely. The lack of childcare availability is near the top of the list of challenges facing Maine's female workforce. The State of Working Maine report in 2023 stated that "An average of 19,600 women and 2,500 men each week listed either childcare or care for older adults as their main barrier to employment, meaning that the responsibility of care was almost eight times as likely to fall on women as on men." This reduces household income and contributes to gender inequality in the workplace.

Maine is facing several crises at once, and several are connected at the hip. Our childcare shortage is related to our workforce shortage. We cannot build one without the other. We, as a state, must work to fix these.

**LD 437** opens an opportunity for us to create long-term changes needed in our state to step towards addressing our state's childcare needs. It will prepare participating students with adequate skills and knowledge of correct childcare techniques for the home and workplace.

Together we can create the long-term solution our state so desperately needs, and the Maine people deserve.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this bill, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.