



TESTIMONY BY KIM RUSSELL
STATE DIRECTOR, READYNATION

TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 21, 2026, 1 P.M.

IN SUPPORT OF
L.D. 2066 AN ACT TO ESTABLISH THE CHILD CARE EMPLOYMENT AWARD

Chairs Ingwersen, and Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, I am Kim Russell, State Director of ReadyNation. ReadyNation is a business leader organization dedicated to building a skilled workforce and strong economy by promoting evidence-based policy solutions that prepare children to succeed in education, work, and life. Since August 2024 we have been operating under Educate Maine.

I am testifying in support of LD 2066, a bill to establish and make more permanent the current Child Care Affordability Program's Employment Award – which works like a scholarship to cover the cost of child care for the parents who are working in child care and need care for their own children. Thank you Senator Ingwersen for bringing his important measure forward, and for your steadfast support of Maine's still fragile child care workforce.

This program is both a workforce recruiting and retention tool for our child care workforce, which, as you may recall, is incredibly low-paid. Even with the wage supplement increases you and your colleagues have approved in recent years, the average pay of a child care worker in Maine is \$16.42/hr. Or about \$34,000 annually. Which is \$6,000 a year less than Maine's starting wage for a PreK-12 public school teacher; and \$28,000 lower than the average annual salary of a Maine public school teacher.

Some of you who served in the 131st session will recall that the intent of the law that first created the CCAP Employment Award for child care workers was not as a pilot program. It was meant to be permanent, but DHHS requested it start as a pilot. Given its need and popularity, last year the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee extended funding for this program through this fiscal year. But without action by you and your House and Senate colleagues, it will end as of June 30, 2026.

Some in the administration have said that this program is duplicative since so many of our child care workers already qualify for the CCAP program. Given their low wages, this is true. But CCAP still requires that these parents pay a weekly co-pay for their children. And, I would point out that beyond CCAP eligibility, the Employment Award is supporting other children of child care providers who are not part of CCAP. There are program directors who will tell you how this program helps them hire, retain and support their workforce, who also are parents of young children.

Recent reports from DHHS show that as of September 2025, 511 children from eligible families—one in which one parent works in child care -- were participating in this program. Of those – 62% were also eligible for CCAP, thus 38% of awardees receive tuition support only through the Employment Award. To dovetail on our



earlier conversation about infant and toddler child care needs – 23% of children receiving this award are infants and toddlers. Twenty-five percent are preschoolers. And 42% are school-age.

And the waitlist for this program, as of four months ago, is 470 children from 312 families.

There is clearly a need and this program is well utilized by the very members of the child care workforce we seek to build and strengthen. It supports young parents – the vast majority of which are women. Please see the attached Educate Maine child care workforce factsheet showing that 60% of our child care workforce are younger than 40, and 93% of this workforce are women.

LD 2066 is a modest investment to a worthy and critically needed field in Maine.

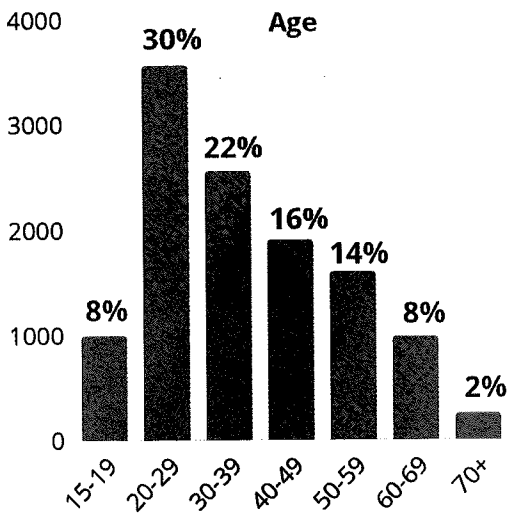
I hope this bill earns your unanimous support.

Maine's Child Care Workforce

CHILD CARE EDUCATORS ARE THE "WORKFORCE BEHIND THE WORKFORCE."

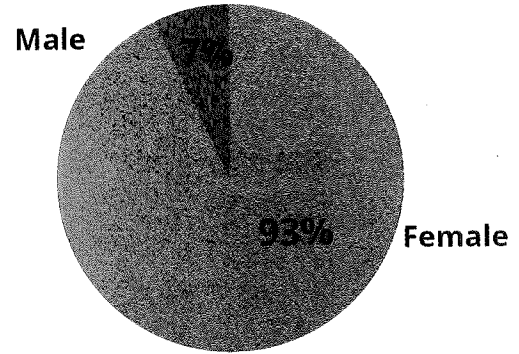
There are estimated to be ~7,500 early childhood educators working across Maine. Their care sets the stage for kindergarten readiness and allows parents and caregivers to work.

60% of child care educators are younger than 40. Over one third is younger than 30.



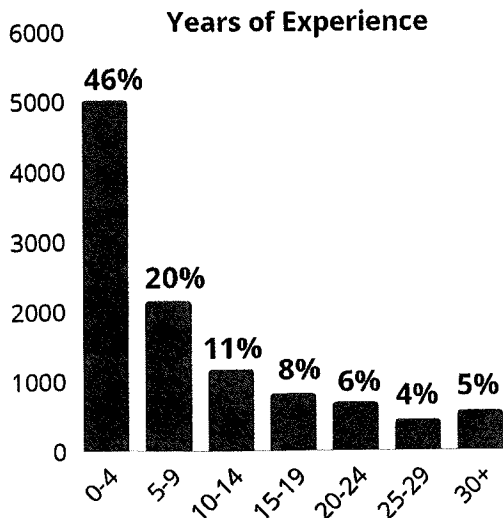
93% of early educators are women.
93% of early educators are white.

3% identify as Black/African American, 2% as Hispanic, 1% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 1% as Asian.



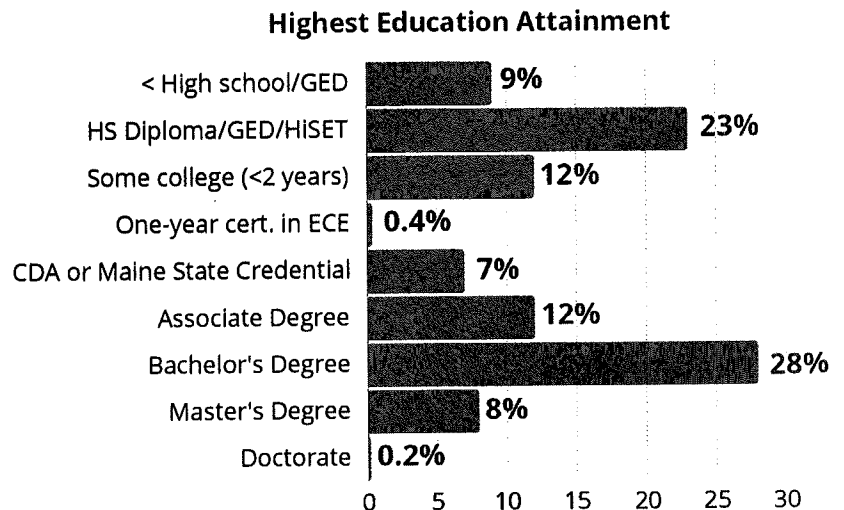
46% of child care educators have under 5 years of experience.

Two-thirds have less than 10 years of experience in the field.



48% of child care educators have an Associate degree or higher.

36% have a Bachelor's degree or higher, comparable to statewide trends.



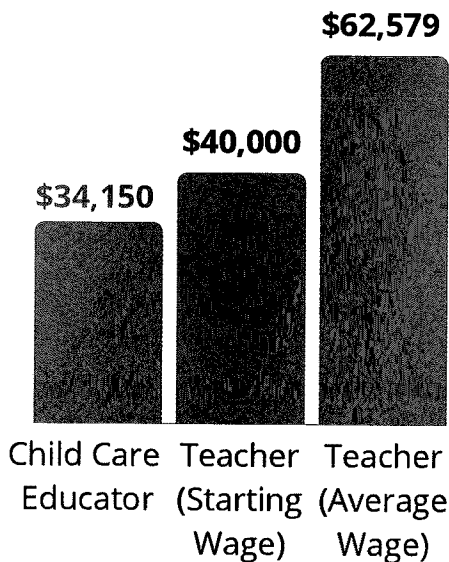
Maine's Child Care Workforce

CHILD CARE EDUCATORS FACE PERSISTENTLY LOW WAGES DUE TO CHRONIC UNDERINVESTMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION.

Maine has made strides in acknowledging the value of child care educators, however, progress is tenuous. Proposed budget cuts threaten an already unstable field.

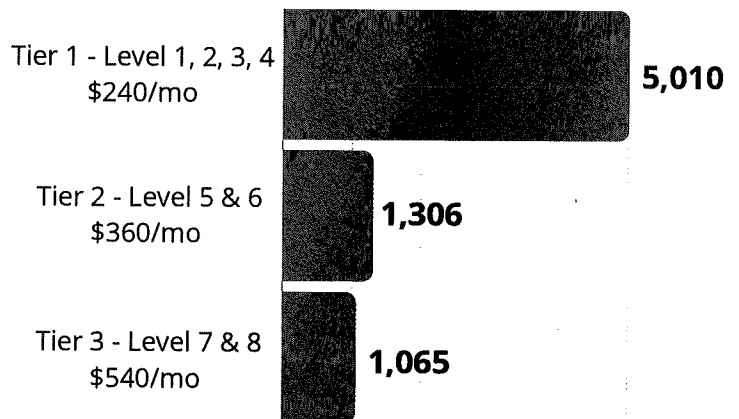
The mean annual wage of a child care educator in Maine is \$34,150 (\$16.41/hr.).

This is considered below living wage for a single adult.



7,381 people, on average, have received monthly wage supplements in 2024.

The proposed budget plans to rollback a significant portion of these monthly wage supplements to our child care educators.



Note: Wage Supplements are tied to MRTQ Career Lattices. Level descriptions can be found [here](https://www.mrtq.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MRTQ_Lattices.pdf): https://www.mrtq.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MRTQ_Lattices.pdf

Takeaways

- Given the long hours and **low wages** (average \$16.40/hr) in the field, Maine's child care educator workforce is relatively **young and inexperienced**.
- There is significant turnover in the field, however, specific figures are hard to come by. **Maine's Department of Health and Human Services does not collect data on child care worker turnover.**
- According to the [2024 Early Childhood Workforce Index](#) from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, child care educators are paid in the bottom three percent of all U.S. occupations.
- Child care is the workforce behind every other workforce in Maine.** Additionally, child care is a meaningful, intensive occupation that provides tremendous benefit to families, businesses, and communities. Wages are not commensurate with the value our early educators provide.