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Maine Association for the
Education of Young Children

Testimony in Support of LD 2066: An Act to Establish the Child Care Employment Award

**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Honorable Members of the Health and
Human Services Committee**

1/21/2026

My name is Heather Marden, Co-Executive Director of the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children and I am here to speak in strong support of LD 2066, legislation that would make Maine's Child Care Employment Award program permanent. This program is a critical investment in Maine's early childhood workforce—a workforce that is essential not only to children and families, but to the stability and growth of our broader economy.

The child care workforce in Maine faces extraordinary challenges. Early childhood educators are paid among the **lowest 3% of wage earners** in the state. Many do not have access to **health insurance, paid leave, or other workplace benefits**, making it difficult to recruit and retain educators despite the demanding and essential nature of their work. These conditions contribute to program closures, high turnover rates, and instability in access to child care for Maine families. Without targeted support, Maine risks losing even more programs, leaving children without safe and consistent spaces to learn and grow.

The Employment Award directly addresses these workforce challenges by providing a unique and meaningful industry benefit: tuition support for employees' children in licensed child care programs. As of September 2025, the program supports 511 children from 313 families, meaning at least one parent in every participating family is receiving the award. Of these employees, 62% are CCAP-eligible and receive subsidy assistance, while 38% are ineligible for CCAP and rely exclusively on the Employment Award. This ensures that all educators, regardless of their eligibility for other programs, have access to this critical support.

Even for those employees who already qualify for CCAP, the Employment Award provides an average weekly savings of over \$100, a benefit that is rare in this industry and significantly strengthens retention. The children served span all early learning ages,

including 23% infants and toddlers, 35% preschoolers, and 42% school-age children, which ensures employees at every stage of parenting can remain in the workforce.

Despite its successes, the program currently faces a substantial waitlist: 470 children from 312 families are waiting for support. Few have been released from the waitlist since it began in October 2024, highlighting the urgent need for continued and expanded investment. The average weekly co-pay for CCAP families covered by the Employment Award is roughly \$114, illustrating the direct financial impact on families and employees.

Unless this program is made permanent, it will **end on June 30th**, leaving children, families, and educators high and dry. This would be a tremendous loss—not only for the educators who rely on this support to remain in the field, but also for the child care programs that would struggle to stay open and for Maine families who depend on stable child care to work and participate in the economy.

This program has proven to be a successful investment in both Maine's children and its workforce. When we create programs that retain educators, stabilize programs, and support families, we must commit to sustaining them. By making the Employment Award permanent, Maine can continue to:

- Support a workforce that is paid too little and underserved in benefits;
- Retain skilled educators and prevent program closures;
- Ensure children have access to high-quality early learning experiences;
- Reduce financial stress for families and employees; and
- Strengthen Maine's economy by enabling parents to remain employed.

LD 2066 is a forward-looking solution that strengthens the workforce, stabilizes child care access, and protects Maine families. I urge you to support this legislation and make the Employment Award permanent, so that the progress we have made is not lost, and Maine continues to lead in supporting its early childhood educators and children.

Thank you.

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**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
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Human Services Committee**

1/21/2026

My name is Bridget Barden, and I am an Early Childhood Educator from Hollis Center, Maine. I am writing to express support for LD 2066: An Act to Establish the Child Care Employment Award.

My family has been a recipient of the Child Care Employment Award from its inception in 2024. Prior to the Employment Award, my husband and I paid \$800 per month for our one child to attend childcare in the program in which I work. This monthly fee was after we received the staff discounts that the program offers. This was a cost that we budgeted carefully to be able to afford.

When the Child Care Employment Award became available, we immediately applied and were approved. This was a game changer for our family. It alleviated the stress of paying for childcare and allowed me to stay active in the field of early childhood education.

Without this program, I likely would have left the field for a job that paid more money, with better benefits. I have spent twenty years as an early childhood educator, holding a master's degree. It is unfortunate to think that there are other highly educated, high-quality teachers who may face the choice of working in a field in which they are passionate about, or leaving to make more money to support their family and their needs.

The Child Care Employment Award creates space for the early childhood education workforce to grow and thrive in Maine. When educators can count on funding for their children's care that is not dependent on how much their income is, then those educators are more likely to further their education. When educators work their way up the Career Lattice and offer high quality childcare, then the children and families of Maine reap the benefits.

Continuation of this program ensures that childcare programs in the state of Maine can maintain staff to child ratios that reflect best practices in the field, keep classrooms and family childcare home based programs open, and keeps valuable educators in the workforce. The way that the Employment Award works with the existing Child Care Assistance Program allows for the funds to braid and blend in order to meet the needs of more children and families. Continuing a program like the Child Care Employment Award sets up children, families, educators, and childcare programs for sustained, continued success.

Respectfully,
Bridget E. Barden, M.Ed
Hollis Center, ME