

**Testimony of Ana Hicks, Policy Director, Human Services
Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF)**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

**Neither For Nor Against LD 2064
On behalf of GOPIF and the Department of Education**

Representative Noonan Murphy, Senator Rafferty and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Ana Hicks, and I am a Policy Director for Human Services in the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF) where I oversee the work of the Governor's Children's Cabinet. I am here to testify neither for nor against LD 2064 on behalf of GOPIF and the Department of Education.

The Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future was established in 2019 by Governor Mills to address critical, long-term issues facing Maine, by engaging state agencies, stakeholders and the public in the planning and implementation of innovative, data-driven policy solutions.

Public pre-k partnerships between School Administrative Units (SAUs) and licensed child care or Head Start programs have proven to be an important component of the state's efforts to expand public pre-k to more 4-year-olds throughout the state. Through these partnerships, schools establish memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with Head Starts or licensed child care programs to deliver public pre-k education to 4-year-olds in their communities as long as these community programs meet the requirements of Chapter 124. The children are dually enrolled in the school and the community program.

These partnerships support schools to overcome barriers that may exist to providing public pre-k. Many schools do not have the space to house public pre-k classrooms for some or all of the four-year-olds in their communities. In addition, public pre-k partnerships ensure that working families can access before and after school care, meaning their young children do not have to make multiple transitions throughout the school day. Importantly, public pre-k partnerships support a community's early care and education infrastructure ensuring a stronger mixed delivery system for all children birth to age five.

Currently 45 SAUs provide public pre-k through a partnership with either a Head Start program, child care program or both. Thirty-two SAUs partner with Head Start programs only. Five SAUs partner with both a Head Start program and a child care program. Eight SAUs partner with child care programs only. However, the US Department of Agriculture regulations related to school meals at off-site locations are making partnerships more challenging to operate and establish. In addition, they are creating inequities for children who are receiving their pre-k education at child care programs and therefore cannot participate in Maine's no cost school meals program. Currently some SAUs are covering the full cost of these meals and many of these SAUs have expressed that they are finding these costs to be untenable. In a handful of cases, the child care programs, which are already operating on razor thin margins, are picking up the cost of the meals that are not reimbursable through the Child and Adult Care Food Program and often shifting the costs on to parents through higher fees. Lastly, SAUs who might be interested in entering into

partnerships to expand public pre-k are hesitant to consider partnerships because of the inability to be reimbursed for meals.

The grant program proposed by the Senate President seeks to address a real challenge faced by the state. We are testifying neither for nor against because the grant program will require additional state general funds to operate. In addition, we have some recommendations for changes to the proposed grant program.

1. The grant program should be operated by the Child Nutrition Team at the Department of Education, not the Children's Cabinet Early Childhood Advisory Council (CCECAC). The CCECAC is a stakeholder advisory committee that does not have the capacity, the program expertise or the authority to operate this type of program.
2. The proposal should include funding for two staff members on the Child Nutrition Team. One staff person will be responsible for managing the grant program and the second staff person will ensure that programs are following nutritional guidance and program quality standards. These positions are necessary for implementation of the program proposed in the bill.
3. The statutory language should refer to Title 20-A Section 6602 as a basis for developing the nutritional guidelines. The Department of Education should craft both the nutritional guidance and the grant program eligibility and requirements in consultation with the Office of Child and Family Services at DHHS to align with the child care licensing rules. The grant program guidelines established by DOE and DHHS will need to explicitly require that the process for delivering and reimbursing meals be clearly laid out in the MOU between the SAU and licensed community program.
4. The exact cost per student should not be specified in statute. The cost per student should be based upon reimbursement levels provided through the National School Lunch Program, allowing for reimbursement for breakfast and lunch depending on the hours of operation of the program. In Chapter 124, policy stipulates that meals should not be more than 3 hours apart. In addition, the infrastructure grants should include transportation as an allowable expense.
5. Grant funding should be available for schools partnering with licensed child care programs in the delivery of early childhood special education services for preschool students. This will include meals for three-year-olds with an IEP who are enrolled in a school's special education program and are receiving services in a licensed child care program. Enrollment in these partnerships will fluctuate from year to year for schools depending upon the number of children with IEPs. For that reason, we recommend that the grant program use the April 1 student counts as an estimate for future costs for programs.

We thank you for the opportunity to testify and provide recommendations for addressing this policy challenge.

I am happy to answer any questions.