



**maineaeyc**

Maine Association for the  
Education of Young Children

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Testimony of Heather Marden,  
on behalf of the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children (MaineAEYC),  
before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, in support of  
***LD 135: An Act To Address Issues in Funding Prekindergarten Programs***  
***LD 255: An Act to Ensure Student Success***  
***LD 386: An Act To Improve Operations at the Department of Education***

April 18th, 2021

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Heather Marden and I am writing on behalf of the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children (MaineAEYC).

*MaineAEYC promotes high-quality early learning for all children, birth through age 8, by connecting practice, policy, and research. We advance a diverse, dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children and families.*

MaineAEYC supports L.D. 135: An Act To Address Issues in Funding Prekindergarten Programs, LD 255: An Act to Ensure Student Success, and LD 386: An Act to Improve Operations at the Department of Education.

With around 70% of children under 6 having all available parents in the workforce in a typical year in Maine, child care programs are an essential part of the system when it pertains to early identification and implementation of special education services.

Babies' brains are most adaptable in the first three years of life. The connections they make in these formative years are the foundation for learning, behavior, and health. Over time, these connections become harder to change. Identifying developmental delays in the youngest years possible can significantly increase children's outcomes later in life. In addition, early identification supports families in understanding their child's development sooner allowing families to implement and learn strategies that are beneficial to their child.

MaineAEYC supports transitioning the responsibility for the provision of early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and the provision of free, appropriate public education for children with disabilities who are three years of age from Child Development Services to the Department of Education. Among this transition we support efforts to improve our Child Find system in a way that increases public awareness for parents, early childhood

educators, healthcare professionals, and public schools. It is also important that this transition strengthens the cohesiveness and understanding of early childhood development among parents and those who provide care or health services to children.

In child care programs, families often develop trusting relationships with providers. They rely on child care educators to inform them about their child's development and support them in identifying delays and areas of growth. This creates a trusting environment where referrals for Child Find can be instrumental in identifying children at younger ages.

Establishing a process, timeline and implementation for transitioning the provision of early childhood special education services for children with disabilities from 4 years of age to under 6 years of age from Child Development Services to school administrative units, provides a good opportunity to strengthen communication and partnerships between child care programs and public schools.

We support this transition with an emphasis on ensuring that children are met with services in their least restrictive environment and allow for parent choice in placement for their child. It is important for public school districts to oversee the provision of services, but not to require that all services be located in public school buildings. Family options need to include the elementary school, family child care programs, Head Starts, and child care centers in the community.

The location of where children receive services and the needs of families, can be illustrated through the current implementation of public preschool programming within school district buildings. This programming is not always what works best for families, if their child needs the continuity that is provided by attending a child care program as an infant, toddler, and preschoolers, or if the smaller group size of a family child care is the best fit, or if the family has child care needs during hours outside of school district hours.

Therefore, families with children who qualify for special education services need to have options that best fit the needs of their child and family. Having choice will be essential in the successful implementation of early childhood special education services under the provision of school administrative units. This will mean flexibility with children whose least restrictive environment may be outside of the school district's buildings or town(s). A child may attend a child care program in a neighboring school district due to child care availability and parent's work location.

*"While SAUs would certainly need to hire staff (early childhood special education teachers, additional therapists, etc.), based on the experience of other states, services will include partnerships with other early childhood programs – Pre-K, Head Start, child care and contracted providers. This cross-sector approach not only helps address the capacity issue, but helps to strengthen the service delivery system, building collaborative relationships and program structures that promote a more inclusive and responsive delivery system." (The Maine Early Childhood Special Education Independent Review by Public Consulting Group, p.88)*

Ensuring that SAU's can provide services to identified children, also means the flexibility to contract with private service providers. The Maine Early Childhood Special Education Independent Review indicated from focus groups that there is a waiting list of children because of the lack of staff to provide services. This transition needs to have flexibility in delivering services to make sure we don't have even less staff providing services while also maintaining oversight and evaluation of those providing services whether employed by the SAU or contracted.

Developing a central billing system to process claims to MaineCare as these transitions are made is crucial to maximize revenue through automation and reduction in administrative burden on SAUs. This will help simplify the billing system and serve as a data collection tool.

Taking these steps towards strengthening Maine's identification and early intervention services are instrumental in increasing the number of children who qualify for and access services they deserve. Please support LD 135, LD 255, and LD 386 in order to improve the operations of early childhood special education services.