

Kim Russell
Fight Crime: Invest In Kids, ReadyNation & Mission:Readiness

TESTIMONY BY KIM RUSSELL,
STATE DIRECTOR FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS/READYNATION/MISSION:
READINESS BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICE IN SUPPORT OF LD 1263
AN ACT TO CREATE A SEPARATE DEPARTMENT OF CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES
MONDAY, APRIL 12, 2021, 2:30 P.M.

Chairs Claxton and Meyer, distinguished members of the Health and Human Services, I am Kim Russell, Maine State Director of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, Mission: Readiness and ReadyNation. These three organizations exist to help support public policy initiatives that help our children and youth get the right start in life, be successful in school and grow up to become the citizens they aspire to be and that our communities need.

I am also one of three co-leaders of the Right from the Start Coalition, which was created in 2017 with the goal that Maine will have a bipartisan early childhood public policy environment where children are supported from birth forward.

I am pleased to be with you today to speak in favor of LD 1263 and thank Sen. Diamond for bringing this big proposal forward.

When we ensure that all children have an equal opportunity for healthy growth and development, we are making long-term investments in Maine's future prosperity. Maine has many of the right programs and supports for young children and their parents. But in many cases, funding is inadequate to serve all who need the programs and supports, and not all parts of the state have adequate access. To ensure that every child and her/his family can succeed, we need to develop a more cohesive early care and education system with an integrated continuum of policies, programs, services and measurable outcomes.

The Right from the Start Coalition works hard to view early care and education policy priorities through three main lenses:

1. Supporting parents and their young children;
2. Delivering effective early care and education; and
3. Building a better system of early care and education

This bill begins the process of addresses one of these three major components: building a better system of early care and education, although, as drafted, proposes moving into this new department only some of the programs that focus on some programs in this area.

As many of you know, currently, early childhood programs are scattered across different branches of Maine state government, sometimes resulting in inefficiency, duplication, and confusion. As a result, many services for young children are not well coordinated or easy for families to understand and access.

To set all children up for future success, we should create an integrated system to support their families and early childhood educators. Ideally it would be a system where early learning, child well-being, and family support come together to help ensure that all Maine children and families thrive.

That would mean unifying early care and education programs into a single state entity. Successful coordination would require several actions:

1. Establish high-level leadership. Leadership is critical to establish the guiding vision, mission, outcomes, principles, and benchmarks for how the numerous systems work together, as well as for coordinating governance structures, rules, and policies. Leadership should have the necessary authority to ensure collaboration between departments and divisions within state government.
2. Engage in strategic financing. Fiscal policies should move the early childhood system toward a comprehensive delivery of services with financial incentives for ongoing system and quality improvement. Financing strategies should leverage federal, state, local, and private dollars across systems; blend funding streams; and secure sustainable funding.

3. Enhance and align existing standards. Maine's Early Learning and Development Standards should be used to integrate services and practices across systems. The standards must be updated regularly to reflect current child and family needs and best practices.

4. Constantly improve services. Policies should drive continuous improvement in quality and delivery of services and should link improvement activities within and across systems.

5. Create accountability. Data should track progress on outcomes, assessments, and benchmarks. A scheduled and ongoing review of data should inform planning, programming, and policies.

6. Engage and recruit stakeholders. To build and support investment in the early childhood system, parents, educators, providers, and policymakers should all be part of designing and developing policies and services.

When we develop a coordinated and aligned system, we believe it will help create thriving children and families by providing support for health, early learning and development, and family support.

Several states, have realigned early education and care programs to better meet the needs of young children and their families. Last session the Maine Children's Caucus hosted former Washington State Rep. Ruth Kagi, who, as Chair of the Early Learning and Human Services Committee in her state, helped create the Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families in 2017. That is just one model.

We hope Maine can also realign programs and services for families of young children into a more cohesive, user-friendly and effective model. We appreciate Sen. Diamond bringing this proposal forward to start this important conversation and work.