

Testimony of Debby Adkins

Before the Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business Committee, in support of LD 1652: An Act to Build a Child Care System by Recruiting and Retaining Maine's Early Childhood Educators Workforce.

May 11, 2021

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and members of the IDEA Committee, my name is Debby Adkins. I live in Portland, am a mom of three, and a grandmother of two. Between the pandemic and a diagnosis, I was forced to retire a year ago after 34 years in early childhood education. I began my career as a family child care provider for fourteen years. I spent the next twenty years in childcare centers where I taught preschool children, and during the six plus years prior to my retirement, I was an early childhood program administrator and a mentor to staff as a resource teacher. I am writing to you today in support of LD 1652.

For families, we know that child care quality, access, and affordability are primary concerns. Administrators of early childhood programs work to create high quality care, staffed by trained professional teachers, while trying to keep costs as low as possible, including tuition for parents, who are the primary financial resource to run the program. Most early childhood educators I know are passionate about teaching and initially envision a long career in the field. Sadly, the low compensation has many of Maine's best early childhood educators, who have years of experience, leave the field, either to work in the public schools, or work at almost any other job, since most employers in other fields offer more in salary and benefits. This has created a child care crisis in Maine, and the pandemic has magnified it for us. When you can't staff a program, accessibility is lost. When parents can't find child care, they have to leave the workforce. I'm reading/hearing every day that many of Maine's businesses, including those who had to close this past year, can't find enough staff to fully open. This is particularly hard for employers during the upcoming months in the tourist industry. Early childhood programs have been struggling to maintain staff for years. The lack of access to child care affects every business in Maine. It is the glue that holds everything together.

To stay in early childhood education after I divorced, I worked two part time jobs in addition to teaching full time to stay afloat. The following anecdote is just one example of how the incredibly low compensation for early childhood staff affected me and my family:

I had been teaching preschool in private programs for 28 years when my youngest daughter started her first year of teaching preschool and kindergarten in a public school. Her starting salary was \$20,000 more than mine. Her first year, my 28th year. I was pleased for her. She was outraged by my low salary. Me too. Being single has definitely made it hard for me to make ends meet. While it may not have been a financially sound decision, my passion for early childhood education kept me in the field. I dream of a time when early childhood educators don't have to make career choices because of finances. I still wonder why a system can't be put in place where early childhood education, public and private, are supported in the same way as the public schools.

The long term benefits of investing in young children, families, and early childhood educators are astronomical. High quality early childhood education translates into children who are academically, and even more importantly, socially and emotionally ready for their K-12 years. Studies have shown that a high quality start correlates with success all the way into adulthood. Having well-resourced child care programs who can afford to provide higher compensation for teachers, will strengthen staff retention, adding to quality and consistency in Maine's early learning environments. LD 1652 is a step forward to address maintaining our early childhood workforce. It is my hope that you will support and pass this bill.

Thank you for your time,
Debby Adkins
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