

Alison Britton
Houlton

TO: Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement, and Business
RE: LD 1652 – An Act to Build a Child Care System by Recruiting and Retaining Maine's Early Childhood Educators Workforce, Sponsored by House Speaker Fecteau
FROM: Alison Britton, MS – Early Childhood Education Instructor, Region Two School of Applied Technology

Affordable childcare access is vital to the sustainability of Maine's economy. We know that 70% of children under 5 have all available parents participating in the workforce, and as we have seen over the past year as we've navigated the COVID-19 Pandemic, if parents don't have childcare they can't work. But access to childcare is incredibly difficult! And access to affordable childcare can be nearly impossible. It is our moral and ethical obligation to fund access to childcare programs for all Maine children and families with a need, just as we do public education for K-12 students.

I am the Early Childhood Education Instructor at Region Two School of Applied Technology, a CTE school in Aroostook County. We provide Career and Technical Education programs to students from over 40 towns and communities in the southern Aroostook, northern Penobscot, and western Washington counties. In these more than 40 communities, only FOUR have licensed child care centers in them. And these centers are mostly small programs that enroll 8-12 children at a time. Sustaining the expenses of owning and operating these childcares in rural settings is a careful balancing act. Every expense you have in operating your small business has to come directly from the pockets of working families who are struggling to meet their own expenses. As the ECE CTE instructor I've had the privilege of collaborating with many of the licensed childcares in our service area. And I have watched a very high percentage of these businesses close their doors, change ownership, or restructure their programs because they can't sustain. These very caring, and often highly qualified, early childhood educators run themselves ragged working countless hours to provide quality care to the hard working families in their programs. They deal with continual employee shortages and high turnover because they simply cannot offer competitive wages, and certainly can't offer benefit packages, to these employees without raising rates for childcare so high that it becomes an insurmountable expense for families in these communities. Over the last nine years I've found it increasingly more challenging to encourage my students to pursue these careers, because it's simply not sustainable! Often the most gifted students become re-directed to related careers such as pediatric healthcare, therapy services, and other avenues with more competitive career earnings. Just this year I've had two of my four graduating seniors decide to pursue careers in elementary education instead of early childhood because they were contentious of potential wages and employment benefits and knew they'd be more capable of adequately providing for themselves and their families as a public school employee. Being an early childhood educator is simply too uncertain to pursue. And those students who have chosen to pursue their passion and forge ahead with early childhood careers often have to work a second-job to financially support themselves; the implications of which necessitates them arriving to work over-tired and therefore not providing the most quality experience for the children in their care. The early childhood educators who don't pursue a second income often become reliant on public assistance programs as their own wages simply will not meet their needs. What a sad state of affairs? We value our early childhood educators so little we refuse to fund their programs adequately enough to allow these amazing and essential people to earn a livable wage.

And when I say essential, I truly do mean essential – high quality early childhood educators and high-quality early childhood education facilities are essential to the well-being and success of our communities across the state. How can anyone go to work if they don't have a safe, secure, reliable environment for their children while they're working. And not only do we want these childcare programs to keep our children safe, we want them to help them learn and grow. We know that an extensive amount of brain development occurs during the first five years of a child's life, before they ever step foot into a public school classroom. Yet, we

still don't hold childcare providers in the same regard as public school teachers, clearly demonstrated by the discrepancy in compensations between the two. I would challenge this line of thinking – if we know that 90% of brain development happens from birth-age five, then it's fair to say that childcare providers have a more profound impact on children than any other educator or provider they will encounter in their K-12 education. Maine can take a step in the right direction by recognizing the value of growing our early childhood education workforce by passing LD 1652.