

Good morning! I am writing today to submit testimony in regards to Speaker Fecteau's Child Care Workforce Bill, LD 1652 - An Act To Build a Child Care System by Recruiting and Retaining Maine's Early Childhood Educators Workforce.

My name is Gina Forbes and I am a parent of 2 children as well as the Director of Roots and Fruits Preschool, located in South Portland, ME. We are a preschool program serving children ages 3-5 years old and we offer both a private program as well as partner with South Portland Schools to offer a public pre-k program within our school. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, we have made the very difficult decision to close our program this June, 2021.

While the field of early childhood is in critical condition due to many challenging circumstances, I want to speak today to the importance of building a healthy workforce. As a director, I can speak the how challenging it is to find and keep quality educators in our field. I am always looking for teachers who have experience and education to ensure that we are offering care that is alignment with our mission and is of the highest quality. This is extremely difficult when the average child care educator in Maine earns roughly \$26,000 per year, which is the same amount that can be earned in many entry-level retail jobs. In addition, the only avenue for raising wages within a program is to raise tuition rates, which are already a financial burden for Maine families. If we are able to offer wage stipends, this would help to increase low wages and help with retaining qualified staff. This would be a huge help for early childhood programs in Maine.

Investing in our youth by investing in the people who do the challenging, joyful and complex work of teaching and supporting youth in the early years, a critical time for growth and development, is an investment in the future of Maine. We cannot say that we value our youth but pay caregivers and educators poverty wages. Supporting the education and wages of early childhood educators means that our children will be receiving better care and our society will benefit overall. When we invest in our early childhood programs, Maine's economy is strengthened, as families will be able to participate in the workforce knowing their children are well cared for.

As a parent, I can also tell you how difficult it is to find quality childcare. I want to be able to go to work knowing that my children are in a safe place with teachers who are knowledgeable, caring AND paid well for their expertise. In addition to supporting wages, this bill creates multiple entry points for continuing education for people working with young children. To support access to quality care, ongoing scholarships, apprenticeships and high educational opportunities are needed to ensure that our teachers are able to grow and learn to become the very best they can be. We also need to make sure that these opportunities are accessible to all and help increase the amount of people able to enter into and continue to learn in the field of early childhood education. We must have the both-and of increasing opportunities for people to enter the field while also being supported by compensation for their skills and knowledge. I believe this bill will support both educational opportunities for those in the field of early childhood and also help retain qualified staff by better supporting them financially.

Thank you for your time and ask for your support on LD 1652 - An Act To Build a Child Care System by Recruiting and Retaining Maine's Early Childhood Educators Workforce.

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