

Testimony of Laura Larson

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 11th, 2021

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement, and Business, my name is Laura Larson. I am a resident of Brunswick and executive Director of Family Focus agency and Learning Centers. I am sending my testimony in favor of LD 1652.

I have worked for a non-profit agency with two accredited early learning programs for the past 17 years, serving 100 children under five and employing approximately 30 people in our early childhood education department. We also oversee six out-of-school programs that serve an additional 300 children pre-COVID with an extra 18 staff members. Like many others in the childcare field, we struggle to hire teachers as early childhood centers confront a growing workforce crisis. Centers are caught between increases in the minimum wage needed for child care workers to earn a living wage and our need to hire qualified teachers. Programs cannot afford adequate wages to attract the high-quality early educators needed based on parent tuition alone.

Research has shown the early years provide a unique opportunity to enhance outcomes for children. And research also supports enhancing education requirements for early childhood educators to ensure early childhood education (ECE) staff are knowledgeable and provide the highest level of care to support healthy child development during this crucial developmental period.

Teaching young children and supporting their families has become increasingly challenging as children and their families arrive with needs ranging from housing to mental health to nutrition and basic needs. At the same time, well-intentioned efforts to ensure all children have high-quality early learning experiences, training requirements for staff, and licensing expectations for programs have increased. Still, salaries have not kept pace with these new expectations.

There is a widely shared consensus within the early childhood field about the importance of a stable, skilled, and educated workforce; however, minimal action to stabilize the early childhood education workforce. Women of low educational and socioeconomic status represent most of the childcare workforce, creating the ECE workforce issues consisting of low wages, lack of benefits, poor teacher health, burnout, and education costs.

But suppose we fail to address the early childcare workforce. In that case, dedicated staff will continue to work elsewhere, especially when teachers can earn similar wages in a less demanding job. Child care wages remain too low to repay the student loans that may have financed that newly required bachelor's degree. Yet tapping families risks putting quality early learning out of their reach.

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