

Testimony of Katharine S. Slomczynski

Before the Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement, and Business Committee, in support of
**L.D. 1652 “An Act To Build a Child Care System by Recruiting and Retaining Maine’s Early Childhood
Educator Workforce”**

May 11th, 2021

I am writing to you as a trained educator, having received my bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education, as a school counselor in training, and as a mother to three vivacious boys ranging in age from 4 years old to 13 years of age.

The first point I would like to make is that quality early education is crucial for children’s positive development and preparedness for learning in school. As a young mother I tried to do my due diligence in finding my son a place to nurture him as I worked. When interviewing locations, I settled on one because the teachers seemed caring, and I felt that it was a safe place for my child. I soon found there was no formal curriculum focus on best practices but a mixture of what the staff thought would be appropriate activities for the children in their care. Often remarkably similar activities would be repeated, handprint art, that had more to do with the staff producing something for the parents to take home than it did for the children’s exposure to meaningful activities to grow their minds and bodies. I removed my son from their care when he was dropped due to negligence. Neither the teacher nor the director who called me saw a problem with the teacher having picked up my son and a large bag of heavy rubber balls as she tried to take the children inside from the play area. They said it was an accident. I do not deny that it was, but it was something that not only could have been avoided but presented further safety concerns because of the lack of training.

From there my eldest child was placed in 2 more placements before we moved him again, this time to a NAEYC accredited facility focused on high quality. It was not until we found the NAEYC accredited facility that I observed teachers having paid time to work on their lesson plans and curriculum. Teachers often in these positions who are paid close to minimum wage, typically have to take time away from their families to do this planning. These work conditions lead to high teacher turn over.

For my eldest son, the teacher turn- over resulted in maladaptive behaviors, one of which being biting. Teachers who were ill equipped to deal with this behavior blamed my son for biting and my husband and myself for somehow condoning this behavior. This could not have been further from the truth. Another problem we experienced as parents was around napping. My eldest son wanted to do away with his naps very quickly. Again, my son, until we found the NAEYC accredited facility, was demonized for age-appropriate developmental behavior that they were not trained to handle.

When my eldest son’s behavior seemed to be getting further out of hand, we had Child Development Services evaluate him. When he did not meet criteria that would enable him to get remedial help CDS did try to work with the daycare to institute constructs that would help my son to learn appropriate coping and interpersonal skills. The daycare was inconsistent with implementation of the plan leading to further confusion for my son.

At the NAEYC accredited facility my son flourished. He finally had teachers who were specifically trained in caring for young children. Teachers who knew about Bloom's Taxonomy and the principles of Maslow. These teachers knew what developmental targets they were trying to hit and had clear plans of how they would attempt to get there. This facility was consistent. The rules that were hard and fast were for the whole facility and no longer varied from teacher to teacher. Because of the better working conditions teachers stayed. In fact, now that my youngest son is attending, many of the teachers my older children had are still there. This speaks to the value of a trained staff and a facility that focuses on lower ratios of students to teachers to be able to meet students' social emotional and developmental needs.

Background checks, which were only fully implemented in daycares in 2020, and "I love kids" is not enough for kids to grow and flourish. These formative years are essential building blocks to education and a failure for early intervention to resolve any developmental issues means that we as a society pay more once children get to elementary school. We need good policy that will help our youngest learners to grow into positive contributors as citizens in our communities and of the world.

Having lived the experiences of lesser trained, lesser experienced educators and moving to high-quality, well trained educators, I can bare witness to the difference it makes in a child's development. Supporting LD 1652 would promote high quality in programs by directly investing in the pinnacle of that high quality, the educators. You can invest in beautiful classrooms and great developmental materials, but if you do not have the trained, qualified teachers to carry out the care and learning, the rest of the investment goes to waste.

Thank you for taking the time to further understand this critical issue for our society: the education of our youngest learners.