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Topsham, Starting Strong

Testimony of Kathryn Soucy 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

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Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement, and Business, my name is Katie Soucy. I am the director of a coalition of organizations in Portland called Starting Strong. Together, we work to improve outcomes for children and families in our community. I am also the parent of a two year old and a child care consumer. I am here today to testify in favor of LD 1652.

Over the past three years, Starting Strong has focused our efforts on increasing access to high quality early childhood care and education as a key strategy towards supporting the overall success of young children, their families and our community. Our commitment to ensuring that children and families receive high quality early childhood care is based on research which points to the positive long-term success of such programming and the significant gaps which exist in Portland.

It wasn't long on this journey before we came to realize that a significant barrier towards achieving our goal was the early childhood workforce shortage. In fact, of the seven local child care providers who participate in our coalition, there is rarely (if ever) a meeting where all of the Directors are able to attend because they are so often covering for staffing shortages and providing support in the classroom. As I am sure many of my fellow advocates have noted, attracting and retaining quality early childhood educators is difficult for many reasons, not the least of which is the low pay and lack of public structures and support for their profession.

As a parent, this matter touches close to home. Our family struggled to find new child care last summer when our provider closed due to Covid and my husband changed jobs. After several months, we were thrilled when our turn came on one of the waiting lists we had been on. Unfortunately, we also learned that due to staffing shortages our son would be shuffled between classrooms and cared for by a series of short term substitutes until they could find qualified teachers. In the end, we were lucky to find an alternative with a wonderful family child care provider in the neighboring town and every night we hope and pray that she doesn't decide to retire anytime soon.

In this day and age, when most families need two incomes to survive and our economy needs every worker we have, it seems more than logical to publicly invest in Maine's child care system. And, at the heart of this system are early childhood educators. Investing in the teachers who work in child care will make certain that our youngest children receive the experiences that build the foundation for lifelong learning while families are able to work and contribute to their communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this key bill.