



Testimony of University of Maine System Director of Government and Community Relations Samantha Warren, In Support of LD 1652, *An Act To Build A Child Care System By Recruiting and Retaining Maine's Early Childhood Educators Workforce*
May 11, 2021

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business (IDEA): My name is Samantha Warren and I am the Director of Government and Community Relations for the University of Maine System (UMS), testifying today in support of LD 1652, *An Act To Build A Child Care System By Recruiting and Retaining Maine's Early Childhood Educators Workforce*.

As we better understand the benefits of consistent, high quality early learning on a child's development, we are also increasingly understanding the importance of preparing their teachers, through both classroom theory and hands-on practice in early learning settings. Research reinforces the positive correlation between the rigorous preparation and degree attainment of early childhood educators and the outcomes of their students, especially those who are at-risk.

Yet low wages mean far too few are entering this important field and those who do are not pursuing the postsecondary education they need to best support their students' success and advance their own careers. The result: too many Maine kids are not receiving the early childhood regular and special education services they need to realize their full potential, and their parents – especially their mothers – are not fully participating in the workforce due to inadequate childcare access and affordability.

Maine's public universities are on the front lines of this workforce crisis not just as the state's leader in teacher preparation, but also as one of its largest employers.

At the University of Maine's childcare center, which mostly serves the families of our faculty and staff and has 79 slots, the waiting list has grown to 214 children. The center has three assistant teacher openings, one of which has been posted since January. The director told me she has received no qualified applicants. If we are unable to fill these positions this summer, we will need to further lower enrollment, already below what our license allows. In a survey of UMaine faculty with dependents, 32% of respondents indicated they have considered ending their employment with the university because of the conflicts between childcare responsibilities and work.

More than one-third of the students at Maine's public universities are now over the age of 24. As our System increasingly serves adults looking to advance their post-pandemic social mobility through the proven power of postsecondary education, the inability to find and afford reliable childcare tops the list of barriers to enrolling, staying in school and completing a door-opening degree. Never has it been more apparent: **if we are to strengthen and grow our economy, we must also strengthen and grow our early childhood education workforce.**

For these reasons, the UMS urges your support of LD 1652. This bill will draw more Mainers to careers in early childhood education and get them to stay, providing important incentives and supports to more seamlessly advance their own learning and earning as they move from our classrooms to those of their own. The salary supplements are an especially important aspect of this bill and to attracting those to work with our youngest children, as many early educators with college degrees are pursuing public PK-3 positions that pay better and offer more benefits than those offered by childcare, preschool and Head Start programs.

We are also excited that the bill expands early childhood education to more career and technical education (CTE) programs, and then provides scholarships that allows aspiring and active

educators to afford to pursue the community college and public university education they'll need to best serve children birth to age 5. This will widen the front-end of the workforce pipeline and build upon the collaborations already underway between the UMS and Maine Community College System that includes the University of Maine at Farmington offering a bachelor's degree in early childhood education through nighttime and weekend classes delivered online and at the Southern Maine Community College campus. These pathways to the university, supported by articulation agreements between MCCS and UMS, become increasingly important with the rapid expansion of public Pre-K programs that require teachers to have a four-year degree. More than half (11 of 19) of the current T.E.A.C.H. scholarship recipients are enrolled within the UMS, mostly at UMF.

Perhaps as importantly, the investments proposed by this bill sends a message that **Maine values these educators who are shaping the futures of our children, and ultimately our state's economy and communities.**

Before I close, I want to share some good news. We are seeing increasing enrollment in our early childhood education degree programs, offered at UMaine (Bachelor of Science/Master of Science), UMF (BS/MS including ECE and EC Special Education at both levels), the University of Maine at Presque Isle (BS with ECE concentration) and now at the University of Maine at Augusta (BS with ECE minor). As a result, the number of university-prepared graduates with early childhood education degrees has increased by 60% just in the past four years, to 113 graduates last academic year (72 undergraduate and 41 graduate).

Thanks to support from the 128th Legislature and Maine voters for the UMS workforce infrastructure bond first in 2018, UMF recently purchased a 10,000-plus-square-foot former call center into which it will expand its Sweatt-Winter Child Care and Early Education Center. Beyond providing local families affordable, nationally accredited high-quality childcare, Sweatt-Winter gives UMF students majoring in early childhood regular and special education as well as practicing professionals real-world learning and observation opportunities. When it opens hopefully next year, the larger, modernized facility will enroll more young children including, for the first time, infants and toddlers, and allow UMF to expand enrollment in its early childhood education degree program that we hope will be in even greater demand with LD 1652's passage.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today for your support of Maine's youngest students and those who prepare them for success.