

Testimony of Tara Williams

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 11, 2021

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and members of the IDEA Committee, my name is Tara Williams, I am a resident of Cumberland, a mom of two children, an early educator who has taught in child care programs and elementary schools, and the Executive Director of the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children. Today I am testifying in support of LD 1652 for my grandmother and my mother.

I know many of the early childhood professionals in Maine child care programs, including some who testified or submitted comment today. Each person's story is important, but unfortunately, their stories are not unique or new in early education. The teachers and staff working in child care centers and homes have been undervalued and underpaid for as long as there has been child care. This was the case 50 years ago when my grandmother first opened her family child care program in Yarmouth.

This was the case 35 years ago when my mother opened Wee Care Daycare in the lower level of our house. When I was in high school she closed Wee Care to teach preschool at a local child care center. When I was in college she and my dad divorced, and he was physically and financially out of the picture. She added two part time jobs on top of her full time teaching preschool, in order to pay the mortgage and the bills, so my sisters could finish high school in the only home they had ever known. Most recently, my mom taught at a center in Windham, retiring during COVID-19 from an entire career where she never saw systemic change in the wages, benefits, or working conditions of early educators.

This undervalued, underpaid workforce was still the case 15 years ago when I graduated from college with a degree in early childhood education and chose to take that degree right to public school. 3 and 4 year olds were my favorite age group to work with, but I didn't know how I would pay the rent on the wages I would make teaching in a child care program.

If we are going to disrupt the historic, but still pervasive idea of early education and care as unskilled and of little value, then we must recognize early educators' crucial contributions and re-imagine the child care system as one where public funding is just as much at the core as

parent fees. The low wages and lack of career pathways are not inevitable, but a product of policy choices that have consistently let down the women who are doing this essential work. It's time for the system to change. Making early care and education an attractive field now and in the future means fundamentally reshaping early childhood jobs. This begins with LD 1652, supporting the "workforce behind the workforce" to create a strong child care system in Maine.