



Testimony of Mary Henderson, Senior Policy Analyst
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Before the Joint Standing Committee on
Education and Cultural Affairs

In Support of LD 1530, An Act to Establish a Process for the Implementation of Universal
Voluntary Prekindergarten Education
May 17, 2013

Good afternoon. Senator Millett and Representative MacDonald, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Mary Henderson. I am a Senior Policy Analyst at the Maine Children's Alliance, and I am here to support LD 1530. The Maine Children's Alliance is a statewide non-partisan, non-profit research and advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound public policies to improve the lives of children, youth, and families in Maine.

We support high quality universal prekindergarten that is:

- Well-integrated with quality Head Start and child care providers in the community,
- Well-staffed with appropriately credentialed early childhood professionals
- Designed to especially serve low income families whose children disproportionately need these enriching opportunities
- Encouraging parent engagement and providing family support;
- Easily accessible even for families who cannot afford a car, and is
- Wrapped with a full day of quality care so that working parents know their children are safe and well throughout the day while they work.

In addition, we believe that creating a universal pre-K system for four year olds must not be done in isolation from the rest of the state's early childhood system. In particular, there are over 2300 licensed child care providers serving over 40,000 children in Maine, and our Head Start providers serve over 3700 children. Head Start and child care providers that now serve children age 0 – 5, will be hugely impacted by the creation of a universal pre-kindergarten. This could be very positive, providing resources, quality incentives, and greater public integration to these often resource-starved providers. They, in turn, could bring their well-learned knowledge of teaching preschoolers, serving the “whole child,” and engaging parents into the public system.

If not handled carefully, however, it could also become an inadvertent disaster for these child care providers and therefore the many 0-3 year olds that they serve. This is because four year

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olds do not require the higher staff ratio that infants and toddlers require and, as a practical matter are less expensive to serve. Take four and five year olds out of the child care market, the providers' businesses may well become untenable. Worse, the care of the infants and toddlers remaining with them may begin declining in quality for lack of resources. In our efforts to improve one part of our early childhood system, we must be careful to plan for ongoing improvement in the rest of the early childhood system simultaneously.

For these reasons, I commend LD 1530 for:

- Specifically requiring that the stakeholder group recommend best practices for maximizing opportunities to coordinate educational opportunity for all young children (This language could be strengthened to require the Commissioner to adopt an integrative process with community providers),
- Requiring that pre-K funding must be used for only early childhood education and may not go for other school purposes, and
- Indicating in the criteria for the common kindergarten assessment that the whole child is important -- social and emotional, cognitive, physical and language development of children are all critical domains to be addressed in early childhood education programs as well as at home.

I would recommend, however, that a Head Start provider representative and a parent representative be added to the stakeholder group, and that the bill be held over. The bill has huge implications for early childhood education in Maine. It will take quite a process for various parties informally as well as formally to learn about and think through the options for assuring high quality prekindergarten and integrating it into the community while maintaining high quality care for other children. I fear that the dates in the bill are too ambitious to have a stakeholder group submit a well-constructed set of recommendations to the Legislature by January (given everything else that is on the plate of Maine educators). It would be better to make this transition with care, allowing time for the thought and education of the various interested parties, and take an extra year so that we can all make it work well for the children.