



Testimony of Rita Furlow,
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Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education
LD 1712
An Act To Support Children's Healthy Development and School Success
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Good afternoon, Senator Claxton and Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Rita Furlow. I am the Senior Policy Analyst at the Maine Children's Alliance, and I am here today in support of LD 1712, *An Act To Support Children's Healthy Development and School Success*. 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.

Because the brain's architecture is built over time, and from the bottom up, ensuring a strong foundation early in life is critical to everything that follows. Strong foundations are built by making sure young children have positive learning experiences and stable, consistent relationships with caring adults at home and in the community. Today, with over 70%ⁱ of Maine children under age six having all resident parents in the workforce, it is crucial to make sure Maine's investments in early childhood reflect the science of what children need, while also accommodating Maine families as they raise the generation that will lead Maine into the future.

The challenge:

All children in Maine should have equal access to the early developmental and learning opportunities that create the framework for their future success. But right now, early care and education is too costly, for families *and* providers, while quality isn't assured. How do we expand high quality care, without raising costs for families? First, we have to understand the cost of quality care problem:

- Infants are much more expensive to care for than 4- year olds.

During infancy, healthy development is facilitated by lots of one-on-one interaction, and so infant care requires low adult-to-child ratios.

- To provide infant care, programs need more staff, which increases costs, as staff are the highest expense in any business.
- Programs rely on four-year old enrollments to remain financially viable, as it is less costly care to provide.

Older children don't require constant one-on-one interaction, but can learn and play in groups and with peers, so adult-to-child ratios much less restrictive.

- Relatedly, because the value of subsidies that low-income families receive doesn't come close to the cost of providing high quality infant and toddler care, and families can't make up the difference, providers that accept subsidies can barely cover health and safety requirements, much less provide high-quality programming.

A solution:

First Four for ME is a proposal to scale up a model of early childhood service delivery that has been successful in local communities across the country, including here in Maine in Somerset County. It also helps prevent the financial destabilization of the early childhood system when state or communities create or expand public pre-K.

First Four for ME is modeled after the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership or (EHS/CCP)ⁱⁱ that, through a flexible funding strategy, allows comprehensive services model to be integrated into traditional child care and family child care settings. This program is being implemented through a public/private partnership in Somerset County, entitled Elevate Maine. Comprehensive services include education, health (dental, physical and mental health), nutrition, vision, hearing, and developmental screenings for children, as well as education and workforce development support for families. While child care programs strive to provide high-quality services, many don't have the financial or staff capacity to provide the services and supports that the most vulnerable children and families need to be successful. The public-private partnership makes this possible.

What do we know about how this model has worked in Maine?

- At program entry, between 38-50% of children did not meet developmentally appropriate learning benchmarks in one or more learning domains (social/emotional, physical, language,

cognitive, literacy, math). At the end of the program year, 100% of the children met or exceeded developmental benchmarks in every domain excepting literacy, which was 83%.

- 71% of providers moved up at least one step on Maine’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), with one provider remaining at the highest step of 4 and another achieving step 4.

In sum, the First 4 Me Model has:

improved quality...

which has expanded opportunity for children and families...

while maintaining the financial viability of early childhood system...

even when four-year olds are being served in public programs.ⁱⁱⁱ

We envision a birth through age five system centered around regional hubs that utilize the national Help Me Grow model, along with the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership model developed in Skowhegan, to provide coordination and integration of early childhood programming.

Help Me Grow is a systems-level initiative that connects parents with early learning providers, health care providers, and child-serving state and local agencies to assist families in locating appropriate services for their children. *Help Me Grow* does not provide direct services. Rather, it is an efficient and effective system that builds on existing resources to develop a comprehensive approach to early childhood. Help Me Grow assists states to identify at-risk children and helps families find existing community-based programs and services for children through age eight. The model is used in 31 states and has been studied and recommended for adoption in Maine in multiple past reports.

If we want Maine’s future to be in good hands, we need to support our youngest children — a future generation of young people who can lead our communities and grow our economy. First 4 ME would play an integral role in expanding both opportunity *and* quality in the early childhood system.

Thank you for your consideration.

ⁱThe Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, Children under age 6 with all available parents in work force (5-yr averages) in Maine, retrieved from: <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/7317-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-work-force-5-yr-averages?loc=21&loct=2#detailed/2/any/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/any/14380,14381>

ⁱⁱ Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships: Spotlighting Early Successes Across America. January, 2019.

<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Early-Head-Start-Child-Care-Partnerships.pdf>

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