

The Maine Heritage Policy Center Testimony to Oppose LDs 1043, & 1428 Preschool Funding Bills

Senator Millett, Representative Kornfield, and distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Adam Crepeau and I serve as a policy analyst at The Maine Heritage Policy Center. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in opposition to LDs 1043 and 1428.

First and foremost, The Maine Heritage Policy Center is not opposed to individuals choosing to enroll and pay for their children to go to preschool. However, we are concerned with how much expanded state funding or universal preschool would cost taxpayers, and if these programs would result in tangible benefits for students.

LD 1428 would mandate that the state provide a minimum of 50 percent of funding to approved public preschool programs in Maine. This bill also stipulates that funding would need to be found from “another source” if it is not fully funded through the essential programs and services (EPS) formula. Not only are we concerned about the cost this would impose on the state and taxpayers, but it is irresponsible to give broad authority to “find” funds that would cover the cost of these programs. Does this mean the legislature could raid the Fund for a Healthy Maine to pay for public preschool programs? Where might these funds be found? Would we have enough money to pay for 50 percent or would taxes need to be raised?

We are equally discontent with LD 1043, which would direct the Maine Department of Education to develop recommendations, including recommended legislation, for the implementation of universal public preschool programs offered in all school districts for children 4 years of age. These recommendations would be presented by January 2020 to allow this committee to facilitate legislation for the 2020-21 school year. Again, the cost would be a large burden on taxpayers at either the state or local level. Not to mention, we expect almost all projected revenue will be budgeted for in the 2020-21 biennial budget, leaving little or no room to use state monies for a universal pre-k program. Our concern is that the recommendations from the Department of Education would result in tax increases on Mainers.

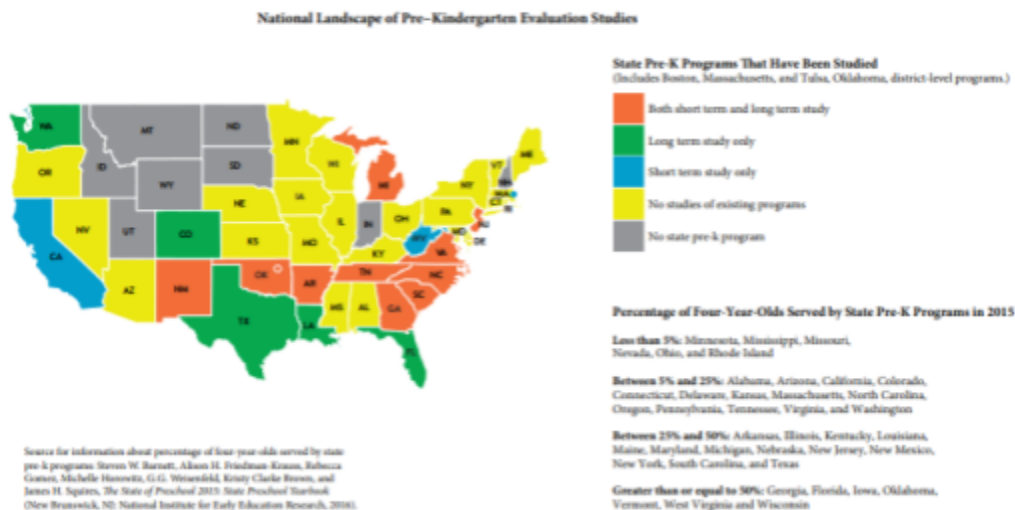
Nonetheless, both LDs 1428 and 1043 would impose significant costs on the state of Maine. Some estimate a universal pre-k program would cost approximately \$40 million annually.¹ The expense to the state would be tremendous under both a universal preschool program or a program in which the state funds 50 percent or more of the cost for public preschool. In addition, the state is currently required to fund 55 percent of k-12 EPS, a benchmark that has never been reached. These mandates are entirely symbolic and mean nothing as it relates to the formation of the state’s education budget. Leaving costs aside, there are other aspects of publicly funded preschool programs with which The Maine Heritage Policy Center disapproves.

¹<https://www.pressherald.com/2019/01/14/statewide-pre-kindergarten-programs-in-public-schools-gaining-momentum/>

One of the larger concerns is the effectiveness of preschool programs. While short-term effectiveness is typically positive in contemporary research, preschool programs across the country have not been proven to increase the long-term cognitive ability of children. In fact, it was found that most of the advantages gained from Head Start do not persist into the third grade.² In another study, it was found that when children gained statistically significant improvements during preschool years, these gains faded when they entered kindergarten and first grade.³ Lastly, a literature review conducted by the Brookings Institute on the long-term effects of preschool revealed that “improvements in learning are detectable during elementary school, but studies also reveal null or negative longer-term impacts for some programs.”⁴ What goal are we accomplishing by spending so much and receiving so little in return?

It should also be mentioned that only eight states and the District of Columbia have partial or fully funded universal preschool programs.⁵ Further, Maine has not conducted a short or long-term scientific study to evaluate the effectiveness of our current preschool programs.⁶ It would be irresponsible to throw millions of taxpayer dollars at these programs without knowing their effects on Maine students.

Because we do not know the true effects of Maine’s preschool programs and the costs would be exceptionally high, The Maine Heritage Policy Center respectfully urges the committee to vote “Ought Not to Pass” on LDs 1043 and 1428. Thank you.



Source: Brookings Institute

² https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hs_quality_report_4_28_14_final.pdf

³ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED558006.pdf>

⁴ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/duke_prekstudy_final_4-4-17_hires.pdf

⁵ https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/How-States-Fund-Pre-K_A-Primer-for-Policymakers.pdf

⁶ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/duke_prekstudy_final_4-4-17_hires.pdf