

Massachusetts Senate approves bill to expand access to early education and care

Today, Senator Mark Montigny (D-New Bedford) voted in favor of legislation that will expand access to early education and care across Massachusetts. S2973 will improve access and affordability for families, stabilize providers while expanding capacity, and increase support for the workforce to recruit and retain highly qualified staff. Measures contained within the bill were formulated following the final recommendations from the Special Legislative Early Education and Care Economic Review Commission in March 2022.

“Improving access to high quality, affordable childcare and education is paramount to the healthy development of our kids and the ability of working families to make ends meet. This bill will finally help put quality childcare within reach,” said Senator Montigny. “For far too long, families have been penalized by the exorbitant and inexcusable inequities in our economy that hurts households everyday while imposing significant barriers upon the next generation. We all witnessed how the wealthy got even wealthier during the pandemic while most Americans struggled. It is not right, but this bill is a small and meaningful step toward restoring economic security and dignity for our hardworking families.”

High-quality, accessible early education and childcare promotes the appropriate development, school readiness, and long-term success of children. It also improves economic well-being and mobility for working families. Quality programs also help employers retain employees and boost economic productivity.

However, many children in Massachusetts are not enrolled in

formal programs and relatively few receive subsidized care. The Bay State is currently one of the most expensive states in the country for early education and care where the average annual cost for infant care is more than \$20,000 and the average annual cost for a four-year old is nearly \$15,000. Approximately 16,000 children are currently on the waitlist for subsidized care and many more families do not even attempt to access the limited subsidies. Additional burdens for families include non-financial factors such as the location of facilities, hours of operation, and transportation options. Programs also struggle to recruit and retain quality staff because early educators with a bachelor's degree are paid 35% less than comparable teachers in public schools and the average annual salary prior to the pandemic was just \$30,000 without benefits.

S2973 will address many of these challenges by improving access and affordability for families, provisions to help stabilize providers, and implement measures to support a high-quality workforce. The bill will increase the subsidy eligibility threshold from 50% of the state median income to 125%. This equates to a \$164,065 annual household income for a family of four from just \$65,626. The bill also makes it easier for subsidized providers to offer scholarships or discounted tuition and directs the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) to annually evaluate and eliminate barriers to subsidy access for families.

Furthermore, the legislation makes operational grants to providers permanent and directs EEC to update its methodology and calculations for determining subsidy rates and grants. EEC will also be required to develop a career ladder that links educational attainment and work experience to compensation and benefits while seeking to set compensation levels commensurate with public school teachers. The bill also establishes an educator scholarship and loan forgiveness program to provide greater access to higher education and professional

development. Subsidized providers will also be able to offer free or discounted seats for children of their own staff.

S2973 will proceed to the House of Representatives for further consideration.