

## Testimony of Gina Forbes

Early Childhood Educator, Parent

Before the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis

March 2, 2022

Good afternoon Chairman Clyburn and members of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis. I am honored and grateful for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Gina Forbes and I am here in a variety of capacities, as I wear many hats in relation to the field of early childhood education. First and foremost, I am a parent. I currently have a 13 year old son and an almost 2 year old daughter. I have been navigating the field of early education and care as a parent since my son was born in 2008 and again now with my youngest.

I am also here to speak to you as an early childhood educator, leader and consultant. I began my career about 18 years ago as a birth professional, childbirth educator and parent support provider and worked with people as they became parents and navigated parenting in the first year of their child's life. When my son was 4 years old, I took a job at the preschool where he would attend because I was able to work and receive free care for him as a perk of the job. It was at that point in time that I delved into the field of early childhood education and later, I returned to school and received my Masters in Early Childhood Education. I am now a certified early childhood educator in the State of Maine where I live and work. In addition, I have become an early childhood consultant and began an educational consulting business, which focuses on supporting inclusive and supportive educational environments for all children and families, particularly those within the LGBTQ+ community. I currently serve as the Public Policy Chair as a board member of Maine's Association for the Education of Young Children (MaineAEYC), and finally, I am a member of the Affiliate Advisory Council of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which is a non-governing board focused on creating a high-performing, inclusive organization at the national level and within state affiliate organizations.

I would like to begin my testimony by sharing my first-hand experience as an early childhood educator and past director of a childcare center. For the first 8 years of my career in the early childhood classroom, I worked at a program called Roots and Fruits Preschool in South Portland, Maine. Roots and Fruits was part of a larger non-profit organization, called One Tree Center, whose mission was to promote love-based social change within institutions and communities through education rooted in peace, pluralism, and partnership. I entered the field as an assistant teacher making just above

minimum wage, but because my son attended the school free of cost, it was a worthwhile job for me as a single parent.

While wages were a struggle, my time working with children in the classroom was delightful. I found that I had a real passion as an early educator. Our program was nationally accredited and was of the highest quality rating in Maine. I watched my own son thrive in the program, which prepared him as a whole person before he entered kindergarten. He learned social-emotional and pre-academic skills that set him up for lifelong success. Roots and Fruits was known for celebrating the whole child and family, celebrating diversity and empowering young children to be their best selves. Over the years, many families gave feedback that attending Roots and Fruits changed their child's life for the better and impacted their entire family's well-being. This is an example of what we know is possible for children and families when high quality early education and care is accessible to them. Research has shown that the most critical times for human growth and development happen between the ages of 0-5 years and that consistent, loving care and education during that time sets children up for optimal growth and development that lasts a lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

In 2017, I was hired as Director of the Roots and Fruits preschool program and in my time as director, I became very intimate with the joys and challenges of running a successful, high quality early education program. Our program was licensed in Maine for up to 49 children, but we capped registration at about 36-38 children to provide lower staff to student ratios. As a Director, I was first and foremost committed to quality education for the children and families in our care, yet it was always a delicate balancing act of enrolling enough children so that the business could be financially successful and sustainable while also assuring that there were not too many children for our space, program, staff and standard of care. In alignment with our mission, we aimed to serve a diverse array of families from a variety of backgrounds, including income levels. To do so, we accepted child care subsidy payments, aimed to keep our rates at market value and provided some scholarships and sliding scale options for families in need. As a director, it became clear to me that the business structure of our organization, and in the field of early childhood in general, was set up so that the only way to address increased costs, including increasing staff wages, was to increase tuition rates for families. Roughly 70% of our 2020 budget went to paying staff salaries, wages and payroll expenses. In essence, low staff wages subsidize the cost of care to families, or said another way, keeping the cost of care accessible to families means keeping wages at or below a certain level for staff. We were also never able to afford to offer healthcare benefits to staff. This lack of fair pay, inability to offer health and other benefits, and the high demands of the job is a recipe for teacher burnout, stress, and sometimes turnover. This is definitely not conducive to creating optimal learning environments for children. Because our bottom line financials were always within slim

margins, significant changes to that situation were not feasible on our own. We, like many childcare centers and programs<sup>ii</sup>, were generally a break-even organization with a small rainy-day fund to help us in case of emergency.

I am sharing all of this information about pre-pandemic times because it has everything to do with the crisis we found ourselves in when March 2020 came around. In the initial first wave of covid-19, we closed our school and remained closed until mid-June 2020 when we had clearer guidelines from Maine's CDC and DHHS about how to run a childcare program safely. We held spots for families who wanted to stay enrolled, paused tuition payments during our closure, and we laid off some staff not knowing when we could reopen. When we finally had a reopening plan, it was at a much reduced version of our normal functioning. Over the summer, between June and August 2020, we had 4 staff including myself and only 8 children enrolled. In September, we opened up our program to 20 children and their families and created two classrooms of 10 children each. We re-hired 6 staff total- myself, 2 lead teachers and additional staff to manage new cleaning protocols, new safety procedures, and as support staff in case of the need for substitutes. We created new safety protocols in alignment with Maine state guidance and we adjusted to a new way of doing business.

With the new reduction in enrollment, we had to make the difficult decision to raise tuition for families in September 2020. This was a challenging decision as we knew families were navigating their own job losses, wage changes and the shifting landscape of the covid-19 crisis. Even with that increase in tuition rates, our organization ran the program knowing that it would be at a projected deficit for the year due to the increased costs associated with lower enrollment and additional safety materials and procedures. We were hopeful that some changes were around the corner to help us maintain our program.

Thankfully, during the 2020-2021 school year, we received a Paycheck Protection Program loan and federal covid relief funds that made it possible for us to run our program throughout the year. These funds were what made it possible for us to cover the costs related to additional cleaning supplies, personal protection equipment, and to help cover the losses from our closure and lower enrollment numbers. We were also able to give additional bonuses to staff in lieu of hazard pay that helped to temporarily increase staff income. Yet, without knowing if those kinds of financial investments into the field of early childhood education were long-term, the uncertainty of our sustainability lingered. Unless there was significant and committed financial investments from state and/or federal funds, our program was going to struggle to remain financially sustainable, be able to offer high quality care and to afford to pay educators who had the experience and qualifications we were looking for. While we could choose to

continue to raise our tuition rates, this would put our organization's values of offering care to diverse families at risk, as only affluent families would be able to afford the higher rates and enroll their child(ren) in our care. The diversity of families that we cherished at the heart of our organization would become harder and harder to serve without a big change in the field at large.

It was with a heavy heart that I, along with our board of directors at One Tree Center, decided to close the program at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. Last June 31, 2021, I handed over the keys to our building and closed our doors permanently. We did not choose this lightly. This was a program where I had seen my son nurtured and given a foundation for his life-long learning. My new daughter also was a part of the program as I was able to bring her to work with me for the first year of her life. Both of my children were loved and nurtured there, and I myself had found my passion and career at Roots and Fruits Preschool. Yet, I and the members of the board could not, in good faith, run a program with such uncertainty about the financial sustainability of the organization, uncertainty about whether we would be able to continue to find qualified staff who would be able to meet our standards for modeling our mission in the classroom, and knowing that the only way to increase educator wages and run a quality program would be to pass the cost onto families who already could not afford the cost of childcare.

Since that time, I have had to navigate finding a new job and finding childcare for my own child. As a parent, the impact of covid-19 on the childcare sector has been felt in very challenging ways. In the fall of 2021, I took a part-time teaching position at a new preschool program and opened my own educational consulting business. My partner and I initially enrolled our daughter in full time day care in a center located over a 45 minute drive from my home. Despite adding travel time to my day, this would allow me to work and make a steady income. Unfortunately, after 1 day enrolled in that childcare program, we found out that my daughter's classroom was short staffed and would be closed for the week. It was not clear or certain who the teachers were going to be or how it would work moving forward. In that chaos and uncertainty, I was able to find a childcare provider who offers in-home care just 10 minutes from our home. We unenrolled our daughter from the center and placed her in the in-home care. It was the best choice for her and our family. Our care provider is extremely adept at caring for our daughter and they support my family in respectful and appropriate ways, which can be hard to find as a queer family with mixed racial and cultural identities. However, this care is only part-time and costs more than we had budgeted for with our initial plan at the center. We have consistently inquired about several other centers in our area and looked into other possibilities that would meet our needs for childcare and better fit our budget, but every center we have spoken to has a waitlist, some not only for this year,

but for years to come. Some programs have so many names on waitlists that their waitlists are closed and not accepting new names at all. It is an understatement to say that it is a constant, persistent stress on me and my family to figure out how to afford high quality childcare and balance the needs for care of our youngest child with our work schedules. Even for me to testify at this hearing, my partner had to take time off from work to care for our child. One small respite from this ongoing financial and child care-related stress was receiving the monthly child care tax benefit between July and December 2021. We used that money to pay directly for child care costs. Since those monthly funds have not been extended, we are struggling. Every day, I ask myself if I can continue to afford to teach or if I need to remove myself from the workforce to care for our young child. This is far from an ideal scenario for me and places undue stress on my whole family.

I know I am not alone in this struggle. Families I work with and speak to regularly are struggling to find balance between work and childcare. Parents are dropping out of the workforce due to lack of available childcare<sup>iii</sup> and programs continue to struggle to find and retain qualified staff, keep classrooms open and navigate the needs of young children and families<sup>iv</sup>. One center owner in Maine that I spoke with recently mentioned that she struggled when she had to make the decision to close her classroom for a few days due to a covid exposure. She knew some of her parents were health care workers and would not be able to attend work without care, though they were desperately needed. Nurses, doctors, lawyers, grocery store clerks, and people from every sector are impacted when quality childcare is unavailable. Childcare workers are the workforce behind the workforce<sup>v</sup>.

Most of the issues the childcare sector continues to face during the covid-19 crisis were not created by the pandemic, but were significantly exacerbated by it. Now, more than ever, the impact of low educator wages, the high cost of care for families, and struggles with the accessibility and availability of programs are glaringly evident because of the stress put on the system due to the covid-19 crisis. Our entire society benefits when the childcare industry is healthy and well. High quality early education and care is truly the backbone of our society and we need to fund it accordingly. Our children, families and educators deserve nothing less.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience with you.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2011/hardly-childs-play>

<sup>iii</sup>[https://www.childcareaware.org/demanding-change-repairing-our-child-care-system/?utm\\_campaign=Symposium22&utm\\_medium=email&\\_hsmi=205293114&\\_hsenc=p2ANqtz--\\_2nB8MEZFPjq2G3CT6tBenBx4DnhrSBVXypx1bh8ppaySBy709ss.J2xEUrwkCMOKgqlpRz9zRSVxcdwcc.JqdhF49COg&utm\\_content=205293114&utm\\_source=hs\\_email](https://www.childcareaware.org/demanding-change-repairing-our-child-care-system/?utm_campaign=Symposium22&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=205293114&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--_2nB8MEZFPjq2G3CT6tBenBx4DnhrSBVXypx1bh8ppaySBy709ss.J2xEUrwkCMOKgqlpRz9zRSVxcdwcc.JqdhF49COg&utm_content=205293114&utm_source=hs_email)

<sup>iv</sup><https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LCff5rM1NGYr-N-OQ5uMN2MdHnQFH6pV/view?usp=sharing>

<sup>v</sup><https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ab256f9fcf7fdd9320fc65c/t/60b4e857da68ad5e09f1b09e/1622468702691/State+of+Maine+Child+Care+Spring+2021+Final+Report.pdf>