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FROM THE STATE HOUSE – PUTTING OUR PRESCHOOLERS FIRST

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Every child deserves a chance to succeed. It is a well-accepted truth that education is the key to a successful future, but research and experience now shows that receiving quality education in the earliest years of life can make an enormous difference. Early childhood education not only results in a better quality of life for kids as they grow, it also leads to a stronger economy, lowers crime rates, and ultimately means a better use of taxpayer dollars.

The significance of high-quality early education is proven through research. The brain is at a critical stage of development in the first few years of life, and children need to be in a safe and supportive environment that helps them foster positive relationships, gain basic skills, and lay the foundation for their future.

Early childhood education programs serve children from birth to age five and they can take many forms – from child care centers and private preschool programs to publicly-funded programs like Head Start and Child Development Services.

There are several federal initiatives which serve children in Maine, including Head Start and Early Head Start, which together provide comprehensive health, support, and education services for young children in low-income families. It is very important that we continue to fund and develop access to these vital programs in all parts of Maine.

When children get the support they need in early years, we see the positive effects in a growing middle class and a stronger economy. Early academic, literacy, and social skills lead to higher employment rates and better earnings throughout life. When children start off on the right path, they are more likely to complete their education and go on to develop the skills that make them desirable employees to businesses.

But we do not have to wait for children to grow up to see the positive economic benefits. Early education programs also improve our economy in the short-term. When we support quality teachers and education programs, we provide an immediate boost to a critical sector of the economy. In fact, a recent report by a group called America's Edge found that every dollar spent on high-quality early care and education generates \$1.78 in sales of local good and services.

A strong early education program might be the best chance a child has to avoid a life of crime. Although it may seem like an unusual link, research shows that quality education during this critical stage can significantly reduce crime rates later on. This is especially true for children who are already in economically disadvantaged situations. A long-term study in Michigan's Perry Preschool found that at-risk children left out of the high-quality program were five times more likely to break the law by age 27 than

children who did attend the preschool. The safety of our communities is at stake when we rob young children of the chance to participate in this crucial time of learning and development.

A disturbing fact is that both the nation and the state of Maine spend more on corrections than on early care and education. Maine spends \$163 million per year to house, feed, and provide 24-hour supervision for its state criminals. In contrast, only \$17.6 million goes towards early childhood education.

It is telling that in his proposed two-year budget Governor LePage has simultaneously requested a \$100 million investment in a new prison – but has proposed to cut funding to K-12 public schools and to Head Start. Additionally, according to census data, Maine spends less on pupil spending than any other New England state. And every state in New England except Maine and Vermont has increased or maintained education funding, yet Maine has cut it.

This legislative session, and in the budget work that will come in months ahead, I hope to reverse that trend by investing more in early childhood education and remembering that our society is better off when we give everyone the opportunity to succeed from day one.