

Early Childhood Advocacy Toolkit



Why Should You Advocate?

The goal of early childhood advocacy is to improve the lives of children and families by educating legislators and policymakers about the importance of supporting our youngest children. Public officials rely on the advice that well-informed people (like you!) provide.

This toolkit is designed to prepare you to advocate successfully and with confidence for policies that benefit young children and their families.

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Being an Effective Advocate

Legislative:

Work with elected officials to educate them about policies and programs, informing them of the impact in their district.

- › Communicate with legislators through letters, e-mails, calls, and visits.
- › Meet in person with elected officials or staff of elected officials to bring attention to your issue.
- › Invite legislators to visit the relevant program in person.
- › Testify before legislative committees.

Media:

Use media to educate and increase public awareness about early childhood issues. Keeping your issue in the news creates public recognition and support, thus increasing its political importance.

- › Offer your point of view through letters to the editor (LTEs).
- › Form relationships with local media. Identify reporters who have an interest in children's issues and invite them to visit a local program.

Social Media:

Use Facebook and Twitter to amplify your message and connect to other organizations promoting similar issues and messaging.



Frame Your Message

It is critical to develop a succinct message about early childhood issues that will capture the audience's interest. Advocates must be proficient in providing this information in a variety of formats: letters, e-mails, speeches, and meetings.

The **EPIC** format is a useful way to create a concise, powerful statement. The message needs to:

ENGAGE the Audience—Identify your audience. Choose information that will resonate with and educate them on your issue.

State the **PROBLEM**—Clearly and briefly define the problem: What, Who, Why, Where, When, How.

INFORM Others About the Problem—Be prepared to suggest and discuss possible solutions.

CALL to Action—Clearly define the “ask.” This should be specific and timely.

**The EPIC format is trademarked by the advocacy group RESULTS*

Communicating with Elected Officials

Developing long-term relationships with elected officials is key to ensuring you will have their support on children's issues. You can build these relationships through phone calls, letters, e-mails, and in-person meetings.

TIPS:

- › Policymakers care about issues affecting their constituents. They will respond to clear arguments that are easily understood and communicated.
- › Letters, e-mails, and phone calls are the most effective ways to communicate. Personal is best.
- › You know more about children's issues than your representative—leverage it!
- › Share personal stories about children and families affected by an issue.
- › Legislator's staff members are a great resource and connection. Develop a good relationship with them!

PHONE CALLS, LETTERS, AND E-MAILS

Correspondence from constituents is how elected officials gauge which issues are important to people in their district.

TIPS:

- › Identify yourself as a constituent
- › Stay on track and include all of your talking points
- › Try to keep written correspondence to one page, and phone calls to five minutes
- › Refer to the bill number if you are referring to a particular piece of legislation
- › Include examples if possible
- › Include a call to action, specifying what you want the lawmaker to do
- › Practice beforehand! This will ensure you feel more confident and will be less likely to forget to cover all your points.
- › Fax or email "letters" to federal elected officials, instead of mailing—it's much faster!

**See the Resources section for samples of a phone call script, letter, and e-mail*

SITE VISITS

Site visits give elected officials the opportunity to see firsthand how the policies they make affect real children and providers in their districts. Conducting these is a great strategy for building lasting relationships.

Before the visit: Invite your legislator, giving them plenty of advance notice. Confirm the date one week in advance. Inform parents and staff about the visit.

During the visit: Be available to make introductions. Use this time to inform about important issues affecting children and families in the district. Showcase an activity, encouraging the official to participate. Take photos. Send a thank-you following the visit, including photos.



Contacting Your Legislators

Your elected officials can be broken into three categories: federal, state, and local. Federal elected officials in Maine consist of two Senators and two Representatives, who serve them in Washington, D.C.. State elected officials are comprised of Senators and Representatives, who serve in the Legislature in Augusta, Maine. Local elected officials might include city/town council members, select persons, school board members, and mayors.

FEDERAL OFFICIALS

The U.S. Congress is comprised of the Senate and House. There are 100 members in the Senate (two per state) and 435 in the House (allocated per state by population). Senators and Representatives serve on specific committees, introduce and pass legislation, and are elected every six and two years respectively.

It can be hard to speak to your elected federal officials directly. You can either ask to speak to the legislative aide who handles your issue of interest, or can leave a message about your opinions on the legislation you are calling about. However, these officials are more available when they are home on recess. This is a good time to schedule meetings with them or invite them to site visits. They may also hold town hall meetings or appear in public where you can attend and ask questions.

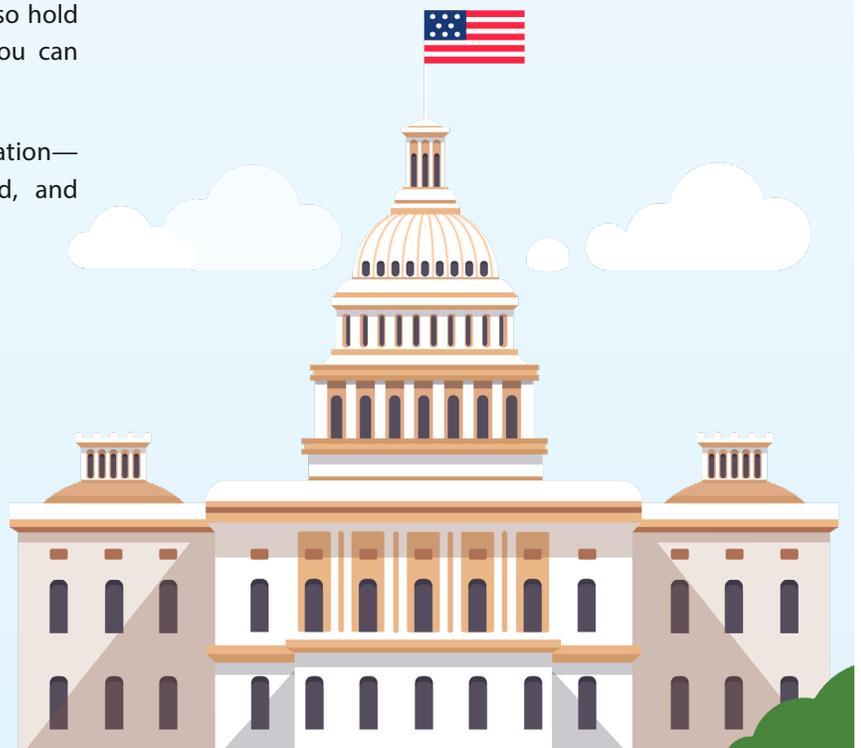
For more information on Maine's federal delegation—including committee assignments, voting record, and contact info—visit www.govtrack.us

STATE OFFICIALS

The Maine State Legislature also consists of the two chambers of the Senate and House. There are 35 Senators and 151 Representatives. State elected officials also serve on specific committees, introduce and pass legislation, and are up for election every two years. Maine has a part-time citizen Legislature that convenes in two sessions. The first session runs January to mid-June, and the second session January to mid-April.

To find your Senator and Representative by town, as well as their contact info, visit legislature.maine.gov

During the legislative session, MCA also maintains and updates a tracker for bills affecting Maine children and families, visit mekids.org.



Testifying Tips

Your state legislators are interested in your views on proposed legislation. Speaking at a public hearing is an effective way to let them know your opinion. Below are some things you need to know about the process, as well as helpful tips on testifying.

INFORMATION ON PUBLIC HEARINGS:

The Legislature’s website contains the public hearing and work session notices. They can be found on the [Legislative Activities Calendar](#), under the “[Committee Hearings and Work Sessions](#)” link.

PUBLIC HEARING PROCEDURES:

Sign in when you arrive. The presiding committee chair will call the hearing to order and announce the bill to be heard. The legislator who sponsored the bill will introduce the bill, after which the presiding chair will ask if any other cosponsors wish to testify. Once sponsors and cosponsors have had the opportunity to speak, public testimony is invited. Generally, the public may present testimony in one of three categories: those favoring the bill, those against the bill, and those neither for nor against the bill but who wish to offer information about the bill. NOTE: The committee may be hearing several bills during a public hearing. Generally the bills are heard in the order in which they are advertised. However, the schedule is subject to change.

When it is your turn to testify, come to the podium and sign in. Address the committee. Introduce yourself, indicate who you represent and whether you support the bill, oppose it or are offering suggestions to improve it, and then explain your reasoning. If other speakers have already made your point, express support, but try not to repeat



it. When you finish, remain at the podium for a moment to allow committee members to ask you questions. Only members of the committee may ask questions of people who testify.

After the public hearing, a work session is scheduled for committee members to discuss the bill and decide whether to recommend its passage. The public may speak at a work session only if a committee member requests further public input and the presiding chair grants permission. If you would like to find out when a work session will be held, ask the committee clerk.

PREPARING TESTIMONY:

Write your comments and be prepared to hand copies to the committee clerk (generally 20 copies) when you testify, so they can be on the record. It’s a good idea to practice what you’ll say beforehand.

ADDITIONAL TIPS:

- › Be as **concise** and **clear** as possible—aim for nothing longer than two minutes in total
- › Keep it **local** and **personal**—that will be most impactful to legislators
- › Remain **calm**, professional, and **respectful**—you might be passionate about the topic, but stay cool. Don’t engage in personal attacks.
- › If you are asked a follow-up question and don’t know the answer—**don’t lie**. Use it as an opportunity to follow up with that legislator later
- › **Be confident!**

How a Bill Becomes a Law

Legislation is introduced by a senator or representative in his or her chamber

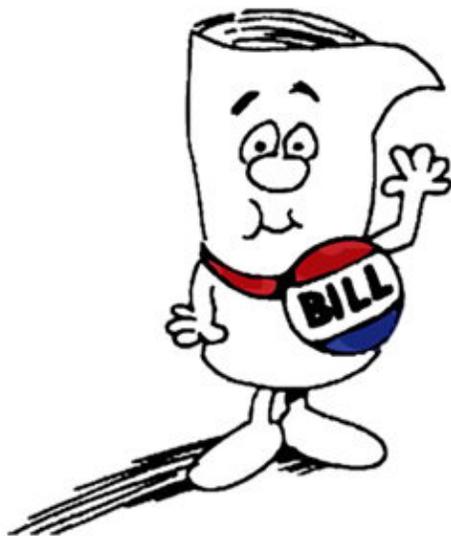
The bill is then passed on to a committee of that chamber, depending on topic

The committee(s) hold hearings and work sessions

The committee(s) votes on the bill. It then moves to the full chamber

The bill is heard and debated in the chamber and put up for a vote

Once the bill has passed a majority vote in both chambers, it moves to the executive office (Governor or President) to be signed into law.



MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

The Legislature is a bicameral body, comprised of the House and the Senate. They each have the power to propose and pass laws, subject to a veto by the Governor. This veto can be overridden by a vote of two-thirds in each house. The Legislature also has the power to propose constitutional amendments by a vote of two-thirds in each house; in order to be passed, the proposal must then be approved by a majority of voters in a statewide election.

Legislators serve two-year terms, in which they meet in two separate sessions. They can also be called into special sessions.

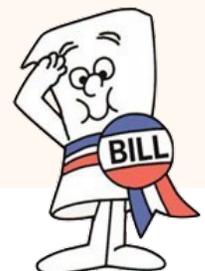
US CONGRESS

Bills are simultaneously worked on in both the House and the Senate. Differences between the two bills are then reconciled by a Conference Committee. The reconciled version of the bill requires approval in both the House and Senate.

The President can then either sign the bill, actively veto it, or decide not to act on it. If Congress adjourns before the 10 days the president has to veto or not, it is a "pocket veto." If the president does not act within 10 days and Congress is still in session, the bill automatically becomes law.

How a Bill Dies

- ✗ It doesn't **pass out of committee**
- ✗ It doesn't get a **majority of votes** in a chamber, or in both chambers
- ✗ It is **vetoed** by the executive
- ✗ It is "**tabled**" in the House, Senate, or dies on the Appropriations Committee "table"



The Power of the Press

The press is a powerful tool for shaping public opinion. Coverage by newspapers, television outlets, and the radio are powerful ways to increase public interest.

WRITE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR (LTES)

- › Letters are most effective when they are in response to an article. Include the name and date in your letter. Send your letter within 24 hours of that date to have the best chance of yours getting published.
- › Be clear concise! Shorter letters (under 200 words) are more likely to get printed.
- › The first line should be a strong statement to draw the reader's attention.
- › Avoid jargon and acronyms specific to your subject/program.
- › Be accurate and avoid personal attacks.
- › Close your letter with a strong line that you want to leave readers thinking about.
- › Find the letter-writing guidelines for your local paper on the editorial page or website.



LTE TEMPLATE

Dear Editor,

The [date] story ["Name of Article"] highlighted [main point of story]. Over a lifetime, investments in early childhood education generate big returns for all of us. With more than 80 percent of brain development occurring before age five, quality early childhood education develops cognitive and social skills that help children succeed in school and as adults.

Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman has shown that every dollar invested in quality early childhood education for at-risk children delivers economic gains of 10 percent per year. Investing in these programs also saves state money due to fewer referrals for special education and lower incarceration rates.

However, in order for Maine to reap these benefits, [specific policy-makers] must prioritize funding for [specific program] and invest in our state's greatest resource—our children.

[Name]

[Contact information]

Early Childhood Programs in Maine - An Overview

The early years are a critical developmental period in a child's life – they lay the foundation for future cognitive, social and emotional development. At the Maine Children's alliance, we want all children to have the resources, opportunities and support so they can reach their full potential and become our future leaders, workforce and parents. This starts with early access to affordable, high-quality early childhood programs that nurture and stimulate the developing brain in these crucial years. These programs include:

CHILD CARE:

Maine has many different child care options to meet the various needs of families, including child care centers, family child care homes, and family, friend and neighbor (FFN) care. Child care is expensive and it can be a huge part of a family's budget. The Child Care Subsidy Program helps eligible families to pay for child care so they can work, go to school or participate in a job training program.

PUBLIC PRESCHOOL:

Public preschool in Maine is designed for children who are four years old by October 15th of a school year calendar. Decisions to implement public preschool programs are made by local school units, dependent upon local school board approval. To establish new public preschool programs, school districts must apply for approval from

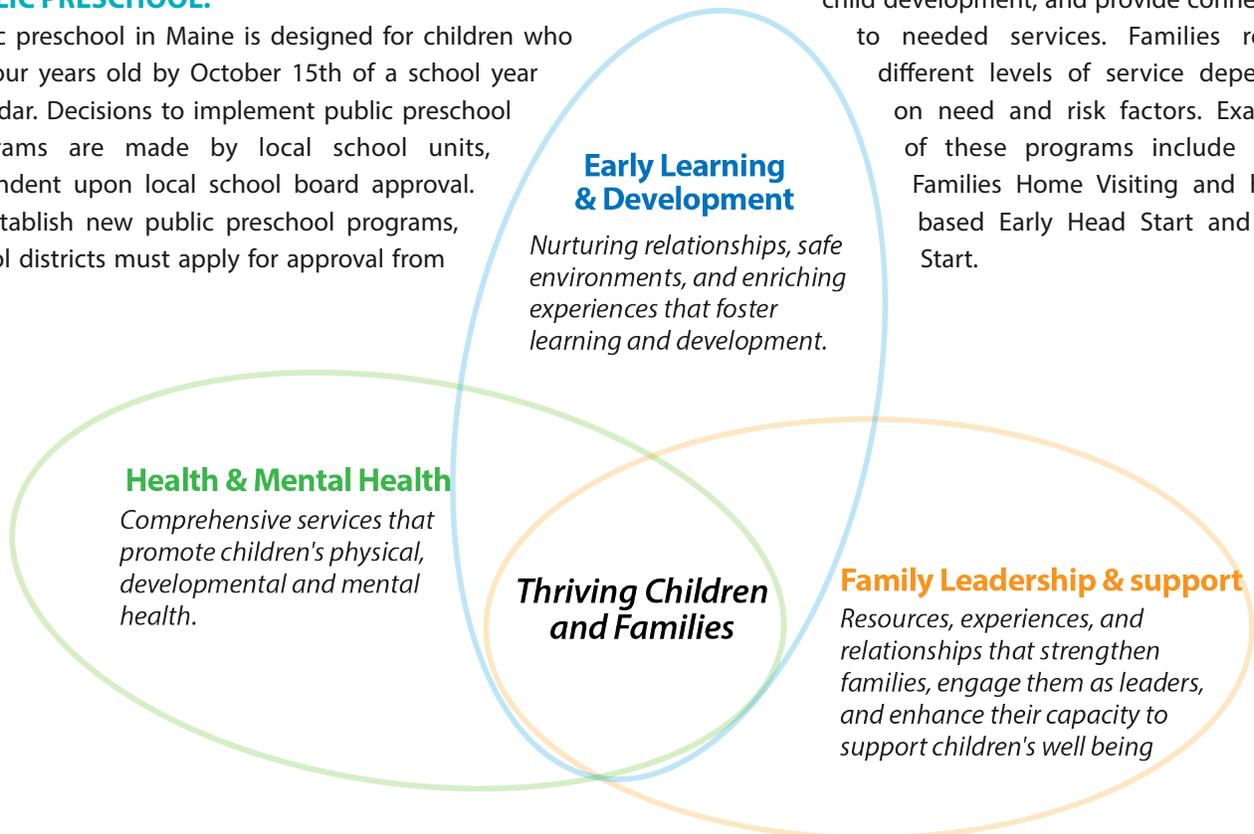
Maine DOE. Some communities partner with local early childhood programs in order to maximize funding and meet community needs.

HEAD START/EARLY HEAD START:

These programs serve families with children from birth to 5 years old. Head Start provides comprehensive services that promote the health, social, emotional and intellectual development of children in Maine's lowest income families. Enrollment is prioritized for children with special needs, children living in poverty, who are homeless, are in foster care, or live in areas defined as medically underserved. In addition, the program helps parents make progress toward their own educational and employment goals.

HOME VISITING:

Home visiting programs work in partnership with expectant parents and parents of babies and toddlers to ensure safe home environments, increase a parent's understanding of child development, and provide connections to needed services. Families receive different levels of service depending on need and risk factors. Examples of these programs include Maine Families Home Visiting and home-based Early Head Start and Head Start.



*Early Childhood Systems Working Group

Resources

SAMPLE PHONE SCRIPT

Hello, I am (name), a constituent in **Representative/Senator _____'s district**. I live in _____.

I am calling to speak with **Representative/Senator _____** about early childhood programs in our community.

I am urging you to support (bill name and #) to increase funding for high-quality early learning programs.

The birth-to-five years are the most important in a child's development. Economists, business leaders, and researchers agree that high-quality early childhood services are among the smartest public investments we can make.

Early childhood programs provide the best and most cost-effective way to give at-risk children the chance to succeed in school and become more productive adults.

I urge you to vote in support of legislation that increases funds for needed early childhood programs in your legislative district. These funds will greatly affect the lives of young children and families in our community.

Thank you for your consideration and attention to this issue.

SAMPLE LETTER/EMAIL

Dear **Representative/Senator _____**,

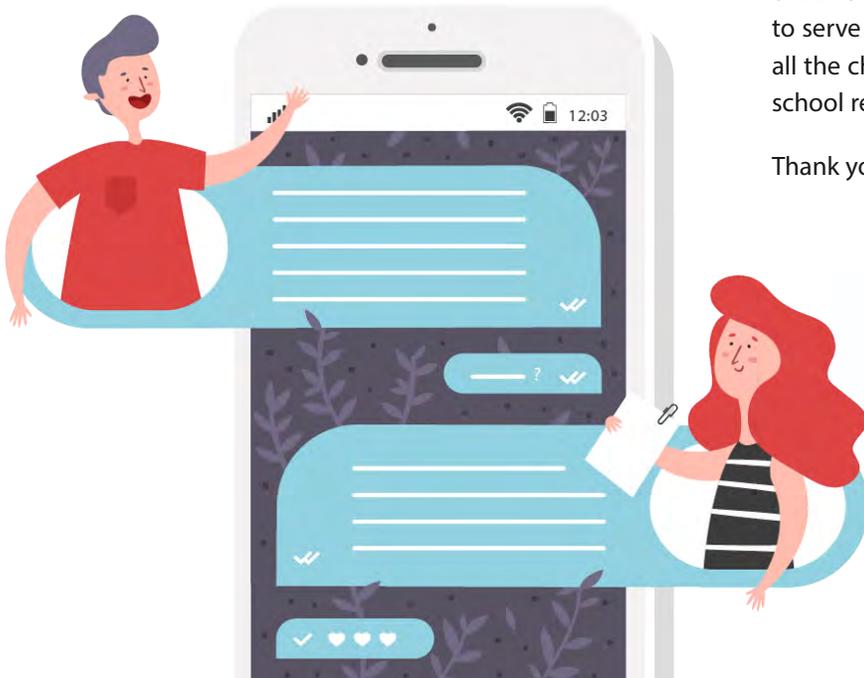
I am writing to you about the importance of early childhood programs in our community. As a constituent in your district, I ask that you support (bill name) to increase funding for high-quality early learning programs in our community.

Research tells us that children who participate in high-quality early learning programs have better language, math, and social skills than their peers who missed this opportunity. They are also more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to become involved in crime, and more likely to become positive, productive citizens as adults.

The birth-to-five years are the most important in a child's development. Economists, business leaders, and researchers agree that high-quality early childhood services are among the smartest public investments we can make. Early childhood programs provide the best and most cost-effective way to give at-risk children the chance to succeed in school and become more productive adults.

My early learning center, (name of center), has a waiting list of **XX** children, and without additional funds, I am unable to serve them. Please vote in support of (bill name) so that all the children in our community will be prepared to enter school ready to learn.

Thank you for time and consideration.



Remember—personal stories are powerful! Anytime you can weave in a personal and local story as it relates to the issue you're discussing with your elected official, the more impactful the message will be.

Talking Points

As an early childhood advocate, you have a chance to educate elected officials, community leaders, the media and other stakeholders about the benefits of investing in high-quality early learning programs.

High-quality early education programs are proven to:

- › Help children enter kindergarten with the skills needed to succeed in school
- › Increase high-school graduation rates and college attendance
- › Reduce teen pregnancy rates, crime, and other social problems
- › Reduce long-term social costs for special education, child welfare, and public assistance

The achievement gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers is apparent by 18 months of age.

- › The good news is that we know that early learning programs significantly narrow this achievement gap.
- › In Maine high-quality early childhood programs include state-funded home visiting, federally funded Early Head Start and Head Start, and programs that provide early screening and treatment of developmental delays, such as Child Development Services.

High-quality early childhood investments provide both short- and long-term economic benefits.

- › They are the most effective investments the government can make, even during difficult fiscal times.
- › Not investing in at-risk children through early childhood programs poses a profound threat to the future of our economy.

While we focus on balancing the budget and reducing the deficit, we must recognize that early childhood programs are cost-effective investments that are critical to the country and state's continuing economic growth.