



Testimony of Commissioner Amy Kershaw Department of Early Education and Care

Fiscal Year 2026, House 1 Recommendation
Joint Committee on Ways and Means

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Good morning, Chair Comerford, Chair Duffy, and members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

My name is Amy Kershaw and it is my privilege to serve as the Commissioner of the Commonwealth's Department of Early Education and Care (EEC). It's an honor to be before this Committee once again, alongside Secretary Tutwiler and my colleagues Commissioners Johnston and Ortega, to discuss the progress we have made at EEC over the past year and how the Healey-Driscoll Administration's Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) budget proposal will support continued progress in the key areas of the agency's work.

As EEC Commissioner, I'm fortunate to work alongside more than 275 dedicated public servants at the Department. Nearly 70% of our staff work in one of our five regional offices in roles that are central to our work at EEC, including our licensors, investigators, family access specialists, behavioral health specialists, and other specialty roles at the agency. The remaining staff are based in our central office at Milk Street in Boston.

EEC, and the diverse network of early education and care programs we oversee, share a dual mission: to provide access to stable, affordable child care so families can work or participate in education and training, and to provide safe, high-quality learning experiences to help prepare children for school and life success. Early education is foundational to closing the opportunity gap in Massachusetts – bringing economic equity and mobility to families as well as educational opportunities to their children. Access to affordable child care is also an engine of the state's economy, enabling families of all income levels to participate in our workforce. We are both the workforce behind the workforce and the beginning of the educational journey for many of our youngest learners, including children in communities that have been most impacted by poverty or have historically lacked equitable educational opportunities.

To this end, EEC is comprised of several core functions. First, EEC licenses, monitors, and provides technical assistance to more than 8,800 early education and care programs and agencies that serve children and youth across Massachusetts. These include family child care (FCC) programs; center-based programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers; out-of-school time and after school programs; residential group care facilities; temporary shelters; and placement agencies for foster care or adoption services. Our child care programs serve children from birth

to 16 years old, and our residential group programs serve children up to age 22. In total, these programs have the capacity today to serve approximately 256,000 children and youth.

Secondly, we administer the state's Child Care Financial Assistance (CCFA) programs, which support access to subsidized child care for approximately 62,000 children and their families across the Commonwealth, including 2,376 children of more than 1,300 staff who work in early education programs. This also includes more than 25,000 children from families receiving services from the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Transitional Assistance. A significant portion of these programs are supported by federal funding through the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant.

The Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CPPI) serves as the agency's primary tool to expand universally accessible high-quality preschool opportunities for all children and families within the mixed-delivery system through community-level funding to support partnerships between public school districts and community-based early education providers. In addition to serving as a vital avenue to increased access to preschool, CPPI is also focused on strengthening the quality of programs in communities by supporting curriculum alignment and minimizing barriers to special education services for young learners.

Lastly, EEC also provides an array of professional development support for the state's early educators and program leaders; quality and operational supports directly to early education and care programs, including capital investments; and, through our community partners, parent support and early literacy services for families across the Commonwealth.

Since I last testified before this committee, we have been focused on implementing key elements of the Governor's Gateway to Pre-K Agenda. This includes codifying and operationalizing meaningful changes to the Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) program, continuing efforts to improve and expand our Child Care Financial Assistance Programs to reach more families with better services, and engaging new communities through CPPI.

Over the last year, we have also been working closely with Secretary Tutwiler, Labor and Workforce Development Secretary Jones, Economic Development Secretary Hao, and a dedicated team of representatives from each of the Secretariats to operationalize the Interagency Early Education and Child Care Task Force, which was established by Governor Healey in January 2024. In her Executive Order, the Governor called for a whole-of-government approach to ensure that Massachusetts leads the nation in early education and child care access, affordability, equity, and quality.

Recognizing that a strong early education and child care system is key to the state's economic infrastructure and competitiveness, members of the Task Force have come together to explore new, innovative opportunities across state government to support the state's early education and care sector. Our work to date and slate of recommendations after the Task Force's first year was informed by 14 in-person and virtual listening sessions that invited more than 1,000 people to attend or offer comments to the Task Force – a true testament to the commitment and the

partnership of our families, educators, advocates and employers in helping to build a thriving and resilient child care system in Massachusetts.

At the same time, we completed a significant re-procurement of the state's landscape of early education providers offering contracted child care seats through CCFA, which had last been completed in 2009. We also continued to advance our work to create a more modern, dignified, user-centered experience launching work to build new portals for families and educators to do business with the agency.

At the heart of all of our work over the past year has been strengthening workforce development and opportunities for new and existing educators, engaging deeply with the field as we work towards the development of an educator credential, expanding higher education offerings and establishing new pathways into the field through apprenticeships programs in partnership with the Department of Apprenticeship Standards.

As I have shared with the Committee in the past, we believe that building the early education and care system families, student and the economy deserve will require us to continue to press multiple levers – to address affordability and access for families; educator retention, recruitment and compensation; and program stability and financial viability.

I am very pleased to be here today to share with you how the proposed investment by the Healey-Driscoll Administration will continue and further this important progress. The Governor's FY26 budget proposal funds the agency at \$1.7 billion, a \$158 million or 10% increase above the final FY25 enacted budget and a \$35 million or 2.2% increase over FY25 estimated spending.

H.1 is complimented by a Supplemental Budget that utilizes Fair Share surplus revenues that have come in above FY24 estimates, which includes \$150 million to provide additional support for the agency and the field. This sustained investment aims to continue to make progress on the goals and expectations that were set out through the FY25 budget and to maintain the level of services the agency is currently providing to thousands of Massachusetts families and providers.

C3 remains a central component of the administration's Gateway to Pre-K Agenda, which provides vital operational support to more than 7,500 child care providers each month. Funded at \$475 million between general appropriation and Fair Share line items, the Governor's proposal maintains the nation-leading, shared commitment we have established in Massachusetts for our early education and care providers across the Commonwealth. We've said it before, and we'll say it again – C3 is a game changer. It allows us to approach challenges in access, affordability, and workforce in a different way than virtually any other state. Our data shows that C3 effectively helped to stabilize the child care system and continues to support system-wide growth through investments in workforce, quality, and affordability. In the last year, our licensed child care capacity has increased by 8,700 seats, or 4%, across the state. Providers are directing a larger proportion of C3 funding to workforce-related expenses, and, as a result, educator compensation continues to rise, increasing almost 20% in the last two and a half years and retention of talented staff is increasing.

In addition to supporting providers, the Gateway to Pre-K Agenda also includes direct support to families through the state's CCFA programs, which provides direct, need-based financial assistance to increase families' purchasing power in the market and helps pay for the cost of child care via reimbursements to providers who accept child care financial assistance. With child care costs in Massachusetts among the highest in the country, many families struggle to afford the full cost of high-quality early education, particularly low-income working families. Today, we're serving more children through the CCFA program than ever before. Governor Healey's proposed \$1.1 billion investment in the program will maintain assistance for children currently enrolled in child care through the Income Eligible and DTA/DCF Related programs, anticipated growth in our DTA/DCF Related programs, and support the full implementation of our recently-reprocured contracted seats. The proposal also fully annualizes the historic reimbursement rate increases the agency implemented in FY24 and FY25.

The third component of the Gateway to Pre-K Agenda is increasing access to high-quality preschool across the Commonwealth through CPPI. The primary goal of CPPI funding is to build a system of high-quality and accessible preschool opportunities in Gateway communities, and other high-need and rural districts, that provides affordable access to all and ensures consistency and alignment of programming, including the provision of special education services, across the mixed delivery system. As of fall 2024, CPPI is supporting 30 communities, including 19 of our 26 Gateway Cities, in various stages of grant implementation. In FY24, CPPI served 2,956 children across 102 early education providers. CPPI classrooms are primarily located in community-based settings, with 82% of children enrolled in center-based or family child care programs.

Governor Healey's FY26 budget proposal funds CPPI at \$17.7 million, supplemented by an additional \$50 million available for the program over 3 years through the Fair Share Supplemental budget, allocating \$25 million for CPPI in FY26. The Governor's proposal will fund CPPI planning and early implementation opportunities for the remaining 7 Gateway Cities that are not currently funded, as well as support approximately 12 long-standing grantees in moving to full implementation of their CPPI partnerships (including 6 Gateway cities). In total, funding would be available for 37 districts to continue efforts to create systemic alignment and coordination, strategic expansion, and efficient investments to make on-the-ground progress towards the goal of universal access to preschool in the Commonwealth over the next three years.

In addition to the \$50 million in the Fair Share Supplemental budget for CPPI, the proposal also includes \$100 million to provide continued support for ongoing and emerging initiatives focused on capacity building, family access and affordability, and workforce supports. This includes sustaining impactful programs we have had the opportunity to provide in recent years, like expanded capital funding for child care providers, and early investments to support work towards some of the recently released recommendations of the Interagency Early Education and Child Care Task Force.

Like many sectors, our early education and care programs continue to face workforce challenges. Recent data we have collected show that our work to lift up and strengthen the state's early education and care workforce are having real impact. As wages continue to rise, we're also

seeing the number of vacancies in the field decline and signs of improvement are also seen broadly in the early education and care workforce as the percentage of vacant positions across the system decreased from 11% to 9% compared to 2023.

H.1 sustains funding for many of our key initiatives, offering professional development and continuous learning opportunities for educators and bolstering programs' ability to recruit and retain well-skilled and experienced educators. Funded at \$5 million, Career Pathways is a partnership with the state's 15 state-funded community colleges and Urban College that offers early educators opportunities to gain skills and knowledge to advance their careers, attain a degree, and continue their education. The Governor's budget also continues to support the Early Childhood Educators Scholarship, which we administer jointly with DHE. In the last year, we've implemented meaningful changes to this scholarship program, making it easier for more educators to receive support to attain a four-year degree and for prospective educators to enter the field through an academic pathway.

In addition to the funding that EEC works to operationalize, the Governor's FY26 proposal also maintains funding for some of the key partnerships that provide direct, multi-generational supports to families. This includes \$18.5 million to provide critical state funding for the Commonwealth's 28 Head Start programs, \$11.7 million to support the 81 local partners who comprise our Coordinated Family and Community Engagement (CFCE) program, and \$4.3 million for Parent Child+, which provides support and resources to children and families to support long-term success in school and life.

Lastly, I want to highlight two areas of cross-secretariat collaboration that are funded in the Governor's FY26 proposal. This includes \$25 million to continue Literacy Launch, a cross-agency initiative aimed at improving early literacy rates by supporting districts with professional development, technical assistance, assessment and screening, and adoption of evidence-based high-quality materials. In the first year of Literacy Launch, we are focused on establishing partnerships in communities through the first round of Partnership for Reading Success in Massachusetts (PRISM) grants. Heading into FY26, in addition to expanding new and existing partnerships, we will be focused with our partners at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education on launching coaching and training opportunities, curriculum implementation, and preschool assessments.

The Governor's proposal also includes \$5 million to continue development of the education statewide mental health framework and mental behavioral health supports for students. Just last month, we partnered with the Office of the Child Advocate's Center on Child Wellbeing and Trauma to launch new virtual and in-person trainings intentionally designed for the early education and care workforce in Massachusetts, aimed at strengthening early childhood educators' skills in social-emotional learning as an essential part of a child's development. We're proud of the work we've launched in the first year of Literacy Launch and the reach and impact of our new behavioral health trainings, but we know we have more work to do. The Governor's proposal will allow us to continue making progress in these key areas with our partners.

Over the past year, with support from our colleagues in the Legislature, experts in the field, and our partners across state government, we have made significant progress towards the goals set

about by Governor Healey through the Gateway to Pre-K Agenda and our shared commitment to a nation-leading early education and care system in Massachusetts. The investments included in Governor Healey's FY26 budget proposal will allow us to continue to build on the accomplishments we've made together.

I want to end today with sharing two stories from programs I had the opportunity to recently visit that highlight how the investments we have collectively been making in the system are at work.

In February, we held our monthly Board of Early Education and Care meeting at the MetroWest YMCA in Framingham. We began the day with a tour of the YMCA's Early Learning Center, where they showed us how they put EEC resources to work in the classroom – increasing teacher salaries and hiring new behavioral health staff with C3 funding, expanding access to inclusive preschool opportunities through CPPI, and building a beautiful new playscape, partially funded by an Early Education and Out of School Time Capital Grant. As we toured classroom to classroom, we talked with educators who shared the various ways they were leveraging professional development opportunities. We met a teacher who was participating in an apprenticeship program, a teacher pursuing an Associate's degree through our Career Pathways program, another educator who will be graduating this semester with her Bachelor's degree with financial support from our the Early Childhood Educators Scholarship, and a number of educators who were able to participate in these programs or take on more hours at work because they were receiving financial assistance from our CCFA programs. The MetroWest YMCA is one of many shining examples of how innovative programs leverage the investments you make to create the high-quality environments and experiences we strive to see in all of our programs.

Beyond our large, center-based providers, you can find similar impact in the thousands of family child care providers we license across the Commonwealth too. I recently spent the morning visiting with FCC provider Michel De Jesus and her students in Leominster. Michel, who has always wanted to be an educator, opened her FCC two years ago and recently partnered with Clarendon Early Education Services, an FCC system, who is now serving our Central region following our contracted provider re-procurement. Through this new partnership, Michel is providing care to local families and incorporating new curriculum elements into her classroom. Michel is also focusing on her own professional development, pursuing Child, Growth and Development online through our Career Pathways Program. All the while, she's created a program that other families in the community rely on to go to work and school to pursue their own economic mobility goals.

Thank you, once again, for the opportunity to provide this testimony to you today and I look forward to working with you as we continue to modernize and transform our system for the children, families, programs, and educators we serve.

I am happy to answer any questions committee members may have.