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***Amelia Bernard, Assistant Director, Children's Odyssey
In Support of LD 2120***

***An Act to Fund the Delivery of Educational Services to Children with Special Needs as
Required by State and Federal Law in Special Purpose Private Preschools
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
January 31, 2024***

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of LD 2120 *An Act to Fund the Delivery of Educational Services to Children with Special Needs as Required by State and Federal Law in Special Purpose Private Preschools*.

My name is Amelia Bernard. I am one of the Assistant Directors at Children's Odyssey in Portland, ME. We are one of the few inclusive preschools left serving children with special needs and their neurotypical peers. Children have attended from throughout Cumberland, York and Androscoggin counties.

I want to thank Representative Gattine and committee co-sponsors for bringing the bill forward, as well as the entire committee for taking the first step to establish an equitable payment for the critical educational services that special purpose preschools provide to hundreds of Maine's most vulnerable children each year. The financial lifeline that has afforded our preschool has been critical in keeping our doors open as we face Child Development Service failures to adequately fund programming for preschool children, tumultuous staffing shortages due to the inadequate reimbursement rates and the aftermath of COVID and the overall systemic failures of the childcare industry. LD 2120 will ensure that we do not lose this momentum and ensures that the interim payment will continue into the next school year, or until such time that the daily rate is developed and implemented.

As the individual responsible for preschool placements at Children's Odyssey I speak daily to parents desperately seeking programming for their children. These are families that should be able to expect a supportive school for their child when they turn 3 but they have instead been waiting months, sometimes even longer than a year, for openings. I witness the tears of joy when we can offer a spot to a family that was losing hope. Our waitlist continues to grow yet we are losing teachers and educational technicians to higher paying positions in public schools without ability to entice competent candidates to fill our vacancies. The supplemental payment has given us hope that we can attract and retain more highly qualified individuals.

Time and time again studies and real-world examples have reiterated the importance of early intervention services, both for the benefit of the individuals and families served, as well as the cost savings over a lifetime of support. As a parent I see the rewards daily in my 18-year-old son, who graduated with honors in June after a successful school experience that began with early

intervention services after receiving dual diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity and Generalized Anxiety Disorders. While my son received the care and attention he needed during his time in preschool, over the years I have watched the availability of spots and qualified teachers dwindle. Community-based preschools serving students with special needs could close if they don't receive adequate state support to provide federally required services.

The threat of losing these bridge payments before a tenable solution can be implemented and guaranteed is frightening as we came so close to discussing how long it would be possible for us to keep our doors open before the payment finally came through just last week. At a time when Maine is out of compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and hundreds of families and children are already on waitlists for specialized early education services, we cannot afford to lose well established and well-respected programs and hundreds of spots that could change the lives and trajectory for children with disabilities.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted,

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