

January 31, 2024

Dear Education and Cultural Affairs Committee Member,

I am the director of a developmental preschool and childcare center in Portland. Children's Odyssey provides programming for children ages six weeks through five years. The majority of our preschool students demonstrate one or more educational or medical disabilities to include but not limited to Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Behavioral Challenges, Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, Global Developmental Delay and physical disabilities. In September 2022, we celebrated our 30th anniversary.

As the director of an early childhood special education preschool, I can attest to the inadequacy of reimbursement rates for services since our inception in 1992. Early childhood special education preschools such as ours fall under the regulations of public schools, however, we are not funded equitably as reflected in the \$15,000-\$20,000 dollar pay parity between ourselves and counterparts in the public school systems. The recent shortage of ECE teacher(s) and applicants highlight the severity of circumstances as prospective individuals choose higher paying positions. COVID exacerbated the weaknesses of an already inefficient and underfunded system. Yet still, we have been having these same discussions over and over again with little to no changes.

Historically, Child Development Services' insufficient reimbursement rates have made it difficult for early childhood special education programs, such as ours, to survive. In fact, multiple programs have closed over the past three years, simply because they were unable to maintain operating costs. Hundreds of Maine's children are on waitlists for special education, deprived of services at a time in their lives when intervention will have the most benefit and is critical to their lifelong success. Research has proven time and again that early intervention reduces the need for intensive services in the future, actually saving money. To fund our early childhood special education programming as it should have been decades ago, would help to retain and attract new staff to our schools that so desperately need consistent, dedicated and passionate teachers. The math is simple. More funding=more teachers=more children served.

In this field, there have always been times that you feel like you are drowning. A life jacket keeps you afloat during the storm when swamps of water crash over you. At its calmest, you float for a bit and prepare for the next wave. I urge you to fund LD 2120 to ensure fair reimbursement of tuition for children with disabilities by the Department of Education's Child Development Services to keep our early childhood special education programs afloat. I thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,  
Laura Glover, M.Ed.  
Director, Children's Odyssey