

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs. Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs committee. My name is Dianne Rowe and I am an IEP administrator for Child Development Services. I am also an Oxford Hills resident with a long history of being involved with special needs children. I am writing this testimony on my own time.

My older brother was born without eyes, and never functioned beyond the level of a 12-month-old. I remember visiting placement facilities for him when I was young, back then there was no CDS. I often wonder what his life would have been like if he had an organization like CDS to provide him the services he needed. This was 60+ years ago. I am proud of the work CDS does and know and believe that given the support, funding and proper Management we could be the best State at providing special education services instead of one of the worst.

I have been with CDS for almost 12 years, and in that time, I have watched as the mismanagement has caused the current state of CDS. When I first started here, all staff at my site reported to the site director who reported to the state director. Now I report to a Part B supervisor who reports to the site director who reports to someone at state who reports to the state director. Part C has the same set up and so does the pre-school on our site. That is 6 new management positions.

When I first started, I did my job, my whole job from start to finish, now we have schedulers, intake case managers and at some offices many more office staff doing referrals and uploads and on and on. With so many hands in the pie, so to speak, it is no wonder things are going wrong.

CDS used to have a board of directors at each site and a site in each county, then they merged and put all the control in Augusta with no board of directors and reducing sites to 9. This allowed for the mismanagement and rapid decline of CDS. With no one to report to, management did as they pleased. It is not a comforting feeling for staff to have your director go to the legislature and fight to dissolve CDS.

CDS has been poorly managed and set up to fail. For years our teachers' starting salary was roughly 15k less than the lowest paid teacher in Maine. Although we have closed the gap it is not where it needs to be, so we have staffing shortages worse than most schools. Our Ed Techs can make more an hour working at McDonalds or Walmart.

Our contracted providers are not paid for their time to travel to see children in person so many stop contracting with us or will only see children who happen to live close to their office. I have a Speech provider I work with who lives in the Fryeburg area. This provider was willing to travel to the Bethel area so see children requiring services in person. This would be an hour travel for this provider but she would spend the day and see 5 children or more. CDS would not pay her to travel, other than mileage and a portion of her hourly wage. She has now stopped traveling to Bethel and will only see children in her area. There are no providers in the Bethel area so I now have several children accruing unmet need hours.

If managed correctly, putting a board of directors in place, paying staff and providers correctly, opening our own full day preschools with typical and special needs children allowed to attend, and our own transportation drivers, CDS could be the gold standard other States strive to be. Early intervention done right would save the State of Maine millions in special education costs by reducing significantly the need for services as children get older.

I have heard so many times, when talking about moving CDS to the schools, that this is how other states do it. What no one ever mentions is that other states do it poorly. I recently received an IEP from another state for a severely Autistic child that moved to Maine and an area covered by our Oxford office. This state had this child eligible under speech and language with two 30-minute sessions a week for speech services. This child was nonverbal, could not be in a regular full-time classroom without throwing things, hitting other children, kicking, biting, and spitting at peers and staff, bolting from adults, unable to follow routines or transition without tantrums. This state had him in a general education placement with no support. Just because other states do what CDS does in the schools does not mean they do it well.

CDS staff has been mistreated, micromanaged, and disrespected by management to the point that workers do not even apply to work with us anymore, and all too often those who do, do not last long. When the pandemic hit, CDS never missed a beat, we were already doing Zoom meetings so we just kept right on going. School districts for the most part ignored their special needs children, CDS did not, we were running like it was just another day.

I am very passionate about this and could go on for hours, but I know there are many others who want to testify so I will end here and thank you for your time. I would like to say that I am more than willing to answer questions if there are any.

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