

February 5, 2024

Education and Cultural Affairs Committee
Maine Legislature
Augusta, Maine

Dear Chairpersons Joseph Rafferty, Michael Brennan and Members of the Education Committee:

I am writing to you in support of Governor Mills' and Commissioner Makin's plan to transfer the administrative jurisdiction for children with disabilities, ages 3-5, from Child Development Services to the local public schools. This is a move that I first proposed to my local legislators back in 2001 and have supported with four legislative initiatives over the past 23 years. The time has come for this transition and to assure that Maine is truly committed to providing timely and quality services to our youngest children with disabilities.

I have a unique history with CDS, having served as a local CDS Director in Farmington from 1987-2004 with another stint as a Part B coordinator in Lewiston from 2016-2019. In the intervening years through today, I have served as a Superintendent and Special Education director in four local school districts. My unique insights into both systems allow me to state with full confidence that the local public schools, like in 49 other states, are perfectly capable of administering these programs. Although there are several pragmatics to deal with to assure a successful transition, the timeline proposed will allow those issues to be explored, worked through and developed.

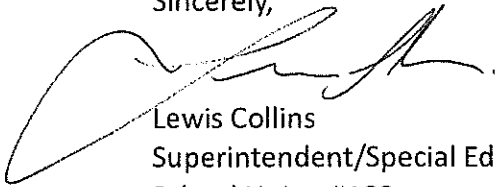
Just like in the previous legislative attempts on this subject, you will be lobbied incessantly by private providers who have a personal financial stake in the outcome. I know most of them are dedicated professionals, but they are also driven by a business model first and foremost. Each student with a disability that they serve is a revenue stream and they certainly don't want local public-school officials interfering in any way with that intake. I have worked with many wonderful private providers and special purpose program staff and they do care very much about these children. But public education exists for a very public purpose and that is to assure a free and appropriate public education, not to simply support a private funding model.

Many parents of young children with disabilities will also testify about their concerns and anxieties with the transition to public school administration. Their kids are the number one priority and they want to know that services will be provided timely and with utmost care. I believe that the transition timeline proposed by the Department allows parents to move forward with confidence that their children's services will not be disrupted. But many of your constituents are also parents of kids who are on waiting lists for evaluations and services. They want to know that the system will be repaired quickly and efficiently so that their children can finally receive the therapies and programs they need. This legislation accomplishes that and transfers the administration of Child Find and FAPE to the local schools that have been doing this successfully for more than 40 years.

It is way past time for this legislation to be supported by each of you and be enacted to address the very real needs of these children and the concerns of their parents. Of course, public schools can do this! With the support and guidance from the Department the transition can begin to take place. We can at last move beyond the endless outcries about CDS and do what's smart and what's best for our youngest students with disabilities.

Thank you for your considerations and I am available for participation in any work sessions you schedule.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lewis Collins', written over a large, stylized flourish that extends to the left.

Lewis Collins
Superintendent/Special Education Director
School Union #103
Jonesport and Beals Island, Maine