

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs committee. My name is Deb Leighton from Gray and I am writing on my own time in regards to Maine's Child Development Services. I am testifying against LD 345 as written.

I have worked for CDS for 24 years in all capacities. I believe there has been 6 State Directors during that time. I have worked with thousands of families with children with disabilities. Unfortunately, over the past 5 years, I have watched CDS crumble in terms of services for children, leadership, and treatment of staff. Sadly, many staff have left CDS due to low salaries and the stress staff are under. The work is not sustainable. We are on the front lines telling parents that it could be up to a year before services are available. I literally say to parents -"It does not feel very good to have to tell you this."

My current caseload is 50% over the recommended caseload numbers. For some staff, the workload is 100% over. To add to this work overload, our site does not have an office to work in due to asbestos in the building, which I worked in for over a year despite repeated complaints by staff regarding air quality. We are only issued a laptop and monitor for use at home. Not everyone has a cell phone for work, this has been limited as well. Overtime has been cut to 5 hours a week and has restrictions. We are required to use paid time off on snow days. In addition, we were told we are "State remote workers" when we have had no choice due to office closure and have to follow the State policy when in fact we are not State employees.

If CDS Part B goes to the public school, we will still have the same issues. There are not enough providers in the State of Maine to meet the needs of children 3-5. Public schools struggle already with staffing. There are not enough transportation options. Larger schools must use a lottery for Pre-K entry. I asked once whose job is it to find more providers and was told that someone at the State level does that. I still don't know who that is or what steps have been taken to recruit staff. There also seems to be a hold up at the State level in terms of approving positions sometimes waiting up to 6 months for vacated positions. People are not applying to CDS due to the reasons already stated above and the recent coverage in local newspapers.

My biggest concern for coming forward today is to support the CDS staff. CDS staff work extremely hard because they are passionate and care about the welfare of children. In all the discussions about the possibility of moving to Public School, I rarely hear reference to how CDS staff are doing right now, under poor work conditions, poor leadership, high caseloads and going day to day wondering if their job is going to be dissolved. That is a hard place to be after 24 years of service. Until you fully staff these services, you are just moving the problem from one place to another. While all these discussions are happening, we have hundreds of kids waiting for services right now. We need to provide support for these children right now. What is the legislature's plan to fix these problems in the immediate? What's the solution to get more staff in the schools when we can't recruit properly ourselves? In order for us to do our jobs, and serve these kids in need, we need to have resource investments from you at the legislature to address the chronic understaffing and recruitment and retention problems, only then will we be able to start to tackle these backlogs.

Due to the current circumstances of waitlists and CDS having our hands tied (due to lack of providers), many are waiting over a year for their education plans to be implemented with no providers available. This will leave added challenges for those children and their educators which need to be addressed yesterday. If this plan moves forward as written, the schools will need to have even more

resources dedicated to help the kids who had their IEP's delayed, thus adding more challenges to school districts who are not equipped to take on these unmet needs. We are prepared to help these kids, we just need to be prioritized and expand CDS resources to meet the demands we are faced with.

I encourage you to look deeply into the concerns mentioned above.

Thank you for your time,

Kindly,

Deb Leighton
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