

Testimony of Kiersten Donahue & Elisha Wyman, Owners/Directors, Dragonfly Academy
LD 210 *An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027*

Joint Standing Committees on Appropriation and Financial Affairs & Education and Cultural Affairs

February 7, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Rotondo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Gattine, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on LD 210, the Governor's Biennial Budget, *An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027.*

Our names are Kiersten Donahue and Elisha Wyman. We are the owners of Dragonfly Academy, a special purpose preschool program located in Palmyra, Maine. We provide a family-oriented special education and life skills support program. Our program has served families in central Maine for twelve years and currently serve eight children/families.

I'm here today to ask you to restore funding for the CDS Daily Tuition for 3-5 year olds Special Purpose Preschools in the Biennial Budget.

I want to thank members of both committees for your work over the last two years which culminated in directing the Department 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.

Thanks to your leadership and the work of the Department, the daily tuition rate for 3-5-year-olds was established for each school over the summer and implemented this fall for the July 1, 2024 school year.

It is making a difference.

Describe the success that your program has in the lives of the children you have served - early intervention makes a difference story...

Over our twelve-year history, we have supported more than fifty families in raising children with developmental delays and autism. Our littles often come to us at three years old, demonstrating stark deficits in communication, self-care, and social skills - developmentally months or years behind their typically developing peers. We are proud to say that the majority of our children graduate Dragonfly with immensely increased ability to care for themselves, to communicate information to caregivers, to engage with peers, and to operate successfully in a kindergarten classroom. Families from past years continue to report evidence of their child's success in public schools.

Describe how the first few months of receiving a daily rate payment has impacted your program and what having a secure daily rate means

Since receiving the bridge payments, and during our first six months of tuition payments, we now have the resources to improve every aspect of our program. Instead of facing almost-certain closure, we are planning for an increased census. Tuition payments have allowed us to increase wages, pay staff for holidays, and hire new staff at a more competitive pay rate. We've stabilized our high turnover rate and now are able, as program directors, to be out of the classroom and keeping up with administrative tasks. We have begun to pay down COVID loans that we borrowed just to stay afloat.

Our waitlist continues to hold steady between 10-15 area families that need support. With our increased pay and hiring rate, we will be able to serve an estimated 4-8 more children in the next six months. We will finally be able to reopen our second classroom and sensory room to provide more space and opportunities for our little ones.

To be painfully clear, the loss of this daily tuition support will force our program to shrink, staff wages and quality of student support to drop, and program closure to become inevitable. Maine law requires direct support staff to have a pay rate of at least 125% of minimum wage; we believe our staff is worth far more than this, and the bleak reality is that we are not able to hire qualified people at even that level. If this daily funding is removed,

Dragonfly Academy will return to bare survival, without hope of repaying program debt or growing our census to serve more families in need. Our staff will rightfully recognize that we cannot pay them adequately, and will move on, while we return to the days of high turnover and lower quality of support.

We cannot overstate the need for daily tuition for these children. The costs of early intervention for high-needs individuals have been repeatedly proven to be exponentially lower than the costs of higher support levels later in life. Skills built between 3-5 years of age provide a strong foundation for increased independence in public school and beyond. We cannot teach those skills from an underfunded or closed program.

At a time when 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.

Please restore the funding for the daily tuition rate for Special Purpose Preschools in the biennial budget.

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

Respectfully Submitted,

Kiersten Donahue & Elisha Wyman

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