

February 23, 2025

Dear Representatives Matheson and Sargent, Senator Lawrence and the members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

I am Roy Ulrickson III, LCSW and I am testifying in favor of LD 71, **An Act Regarding Special Education Funding.**

I am the Treasurer for the Autism Society of Maine and a father of a son with autism who received 14 years of special education in the Dexter school system. In a professional role, I spent over 10 years supporting special needs children in the public-school setting. My wife, a public school teacher for 20 years, and I were able to support our son because of our knowledge of IDEA, FAPE and the federal education regulations. This could not be said for many of the parents of special education children of who I supported. Many were unaware of the services that they could receive and unfortunately, not all school districts actively sought these services for these children. One of the primary reasons for this was the inadequate funding that these schools received from the state and federal government.

Historically, the federal and state governments have not funded special education at rates that are actually dictated by law. This has resulted in local school districts and local property taxpayers having the primary responsibility of covering the costs of special education. These deficits have resulted in several adverse situations for school districts including:

1. Small school districts generally have a higher population of children living in poverty.
2. Smaller school districts in Maine generally have a higher percentage of students receiving special education services.
3. Smaller school district's budgets generally have less flexibility in their budgets to accommodate these students due to lower property values.
4. Smaller school districts generally have less property tax revenue to support the needs of the district.
5. To accommodate increased special education funding needs, districts often eliminate general education positions.
6. In 2023, a rule changed made school districts responsible for paying full tuition for students to attend Special Purpose Private Schools when the district cannot provide services. Previously, they only had to pay for the days they attended. No state funding is available for the price difference.

Every child has a right for a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. In my professional experience I witnessed many situations in which this wasn't the case. I saw first-hand how this resulted in special education children not receiving the education in which they are legally entitled and deserve.

Other states in New England experience similar challenges yet have systems in place to address funding shortfalls for school districts. In New Hampshire, the state will support local school districts when costs exceed 3 ½ times the average cost per students – up to 100% of the difference. Vermont covers roughly 60% of the funding of services that are not covered by the federal government.

LD 71 provides that, beginning in fiscal year 2025-26, the minimum state share of a school administrative unit's special education costs under the essential programs and services school funding formula must be 55%. It is unrealistic to have local property taxpayers continue to cover the rising costs of special education. Without this increase in funding, I am very concerned that the vulnerable children who receive special education services will continue to have the education adversely affected. The time to act is now!

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Roy Ulrickson III, LCSW
Father of Roy “Andrew” Ulrickson IV and Thomas Ulrickson
ASM Treasurer