

March 3, 2025

Dear Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs,

My name is Kathryn Stiefel, and I am submitting this written testimony as a constituent in support of LD 46, *An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder*. While I currently serve as a faculty member for the University of Maine at Farmington, my testimony reflects my views alone, and neither those of the university nor the UMaine System.

My testimony is informed by 15 years working in the field of education, during which I have worked as a preschool teacher, paraprofessional/ed tech, special education teacher, and college-level instructor of students with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In my work with children and young adults, I have seen the powerful impact of high expectations in the lives of my students. Prior to joining the special education faculty at UMF, I worked for five years at Washington State University's inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) program, supporting students with IDD and ASD as they took college classes alongside their nondisabled peers. One of my former students described the importance of high expectations much better than I can; in an interview for my dissertation study, he shared "if you don't challenge your people to the same level as all the other students, they're not going to be able to get to where they want to be in the future."

The state of Maine has the power and unique opportunity with this bill to expand high expectations for all young Mainers, including students with IDD and ASD. Regarding the need in our state, about 6% of children are diagnosed with either IDD or ASD. Of the approximately 249,206 children in the state of Maine, this means LD 46 could positively impact up to 14,959 children over time as they grow to be college-age. While this bill will make a significant impact upon the lives of students and their families, it will also make tremendous contributions to Maine's economy in two important ways. First, expanding access to a college education will enable more Mainers to develop the skills they need to enter a wide variety of career field, both empowering young people and helping to bridge the gap in Maine's labor shortage. Additionally, by enabling a wider population of young Mainers to become taxpayers, this population will rely less on taxpayer-funded social services.

Across the nation, there are a total of 356 IPSE programs. Maine is home to just two programs, at St. Joseph's College and Southern Maine Community College (though it is important to know that STRIVE U at SMCC does not provide a fully inclusive experience to students). Therefore, there is only one program in our state that provides a fully inclusive program for youth and young adults with IDD and ASD. While there are

some neighboring states that have a similar number of programs (NH: 1; VT: 3; RI: 2; CT: 4), it's also critical to note that nearby states such as Massachusetts is home to 20 programs, and New York is home to 32. What this means for Maine, is that if we don't begin to develop additional programs to meet the needs of learners with IDD and ASD in our state, they will be forced to attend out-of-state programs. While many colleges and universities in Maine would love to develop these programs, the passage of LD 46 and the development of grants to support this endeavor will be essential in order to move forward.

LD 46 would also allow colleges and universities to apply 25% of this grant funding to student scholarships, which are absolutely imperative for students and their families. While scholarships are meaningful and important to all students, I want to share some specific reasons as to why scholarships are critical specifically for college students with IDD and ASD. Prior to distinction from the Department of Education as a comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program, students applying to inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs in the state of Maine will not be eligible for federal financial aid. Another compounding factor is the lack of awareness for such programs. Having served on the admissions committee for an IPSE program for five years, I have lost count of the number of times I have heard from parents that this lack of awareness negatively impacted their ability to save. For some, they heard from their pediatrician that a diagnosis of down syndrome would mean their child would never go to college. For others, school staff without awareness of these programs might have described their child as "just not college material." While neither of these statements are true, the low expectations society holds for people with IDD and ASD are pervasive, and often families don't realize that college is even an option until their child is in high school. This leaves families of children with IDD and ASD at a significant disadvantage when it comes to saving. Since there are so few programs in northern New England, it is likely that many Maine families will not be aware of inclusive postsecondary education until we create in-state options. Utilization of grant funding for scholarships will help the state to bridge some of these gaps.

I hope that this testimony may be helpful as you consider LD 46 and the return on investment that it will provide. I sincerely appreciate your time and consideration and am thankful for the work you all do for our state.

With gratitude,

Kathryn S. Stiefel

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Kathryn Stiefel  
Farmington  
LD 46

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