

Written Testimony for LD 1098

April 22, 2025

Dear Representative Murphy and Senator Rafferty, Representatives Cloutier, Crafts Dodge and Kun and the members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Kristen King. I was born and raised in Augusta, ME and I currently reside in the town of Windsor. I am a 20 year State employee and a single mom raising 3 amazing young men, the youngest of which is autistic. Today I am testifying on behalf of the Autism Society of Maine (ASM) Board of Directors. I joined ASM's Board of Directors in the fall of 2022, 6 months after receiving an autism diagnosis for my then 2 year old son. Services were sparse, I had never had to advocate this hard for my older children, I felt incredibly alone. ASM provided my family with support and a loving community. I am testifying in favor of **LD 1098: An Act to Ensure Equal Access to a Full School Day for All Students** with some revisions.

While the intent behind abbreviated school day policies may be to provide flexibility for students with specific needs, the result for autistic children is often unequal opportunity, segregation, loss of instructional time, and systematic denial of a full educational experience.

Many children on the spectrum do best when they are provided with a structured classroom environment and routine. Prolonged abbreviated school days without additional supports can lead to loss of language, fine motor, and social skills. While regression is not a universal experience for all individuals on the spectrum, it is a concern for some. Loss of instruction time in the classroom and peer interaction may cause some individuals to experience a decline in their abilities.

I do not support the exclusion of students who have been removed from school pursuant to disciplinary procedures. Waitlists for psychological assessments can be upwards of a year. With many supports offered only after a diagnosis has been made, and behaviors viewed as something to be disciplined rather than a symptom or a need, it would be of great concern if this group was to be excluded. There is no reason why any child should be put on an abbreviated school day without the requirements of Sec. 1. 20-A MRSA §4801, sub-§1-A being fully met.

Instead of abbreviating school days, we should be investing in behavior support plans and providing teachers with training and support to allow more inclusive teaching. Abbreviated school days should never be a default or long-term solution for any child without appropriate justification, and informed and written consent of the parent/caregiver. Justification, documentation and consent, do not compensate for the lost opportunities for children to socialize, learn, and thrive alongside their peers in a classroom environment.