

Written Testimony of Jenny Eastman

LD 2114 – An Act Regarding Public Preschool Programs Serving Children Who Are 3 Years of Age

Education Committee – Maine Legislature

Position: Neither For Nor Against (with Amendments)

My name is Jenny Eastman. I am the owner and director of The Willow School, a licensed early childhood program in Cumberland, Maine. I live in the community I serve, employ local educators, and work with children from 15 months through five years old.

I am submitting this testimony neither strictly for nor against LD 2114, but to share a perspective on how this legislation is implemented and whether it fully reflects Maine's stated commitment to a mixed-delivery early childhood system.

I want to be clear at the outset that I support the state's obligation to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education for 3-year-olds with IEPs. Maine is legally obligated to provide special education services beginning at age three, and school districts need stable funding to meet that responsibility.

LD 2114 addresses that obligation. My concern is not with what the bill includes, but with what it does not yet require. Without clearer statutory expectations around partnership, implementation risks are drifting from the mixed-delivery intent the Legislature originally established.

This matters because of how child care actually works financially.

Preschool classrooms are the stabilizing piece of the child care system. Infant and toddler care must operate at much higher staffing ratios and cannot break even on tuition alone. Preschool-age enrollment helps offset those losses and allows programs to stay open, staff classrooms, and serve families across age groups.

When preschool enrollment is removed from community-based programs without equivalent partnership funding, the impact is immediate. I'm sharing this not as an abstract concern, but as someone managing a program day to day. In my own school, the loss of just three preschool children to a neighboring district's public pre-K nearly equaled the cost of one educator's annual salary. Staffing requirements, operating costs, and family needs did not change. That is how tight the margins are.

In Cumberland County, several school districts that are frequently cited for strong academic performance have expanded public pre-K without substantive partnerships with community-based providers. This has contributed to preschool program closures, educator layoffs, and increased financial pressure on both families and the early childhood workforce. These outcomes are not hypothetical — they are already occurring and deserve legislative attention.

For these reasons, I support the amendment proposed by MaineAEYC requiring districts receiving public pre-K grants to demonstrate that at least 30 percent of services are delivered in

partnership with community-based programs, or to provide clear documentation and a waiver explaining why such partnerships are not feasible.

This amendment closes a statutory gap by directly tying new public pre-K funding to the Legislature's original mixed-delivery intent. It helps ensure that expansion strengthens existing early childhood infrastructure rather than unintentionally displacing it.

Importantly, the amendment preserves district flexibility and does not interfere with access to services for children with IEPs. Instead, it provides clearer guidance for implementation and supports a more stable, sustainable early childhood system for families.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for considering the broader early childhood system as you deliberate on LD 2114.

Respectfully submitted,
Jenny Eastman
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Cumberland, Maine