



Testimony of Laura Cordes, Executive Director

Neither for nor Against

LD 258: An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions....for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

February 13, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Sachs, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of both the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs Committees. Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today.

My name is Laura Cordes. I am the Executive Director for Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP). MACSP is the statewide association of 85 agencies providing person centered and individualized educational, vocational, residential and community supports, as well as specialized services and care to a diverse population of children and adults who have either intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, or brain injuries, so that they may live full and meaningful lives in the community.

We are neither for nor against the proposed budget as presented but wish to draw your attention to the need for additional funding for Child Development Services to equitably support our youngest children with special needs within the existing network of community based Special Purpose Preschools.

Supporting our children with both the medically necessary and educational supports to be successful in the least restrictive educational environment is the focus of our Special Purpose Schools.

The therapeutic services needed for each child in both the Special Purpose Preschools and Special Purpose K-12 schools are paid for through MaineCare. While educational services for children in Special Purpose K-12 programs receive tuition reimbursement, Preschool programs do not receive tuition reimbursement by the State, which is in effect the sending school, when the child is approved for MaineCare.

The Office of MaineCare Services has been clear that medicaid payments for educational services provided to children is prohibited under federal medicaid law.

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CDS however will only pay for the educational supports of children in Special Purpose Preschools when the child is *not* covered by MaineCare, creating a discriminatory inequity for our Pre-K students with disabilities.

We have been grappling with this inequitable and inadequate funding between the Special Purpose Preschools and Special Purpose K-12 programs for years. We are now in crisis and experiencing a collapse of programs and reduced census among Special Purpose Preschools.

At a time when COVID has placed an extraordinary burden on families with children who have special needs, access to early intervention and special education in early childhood is critical to development and learning for children with disabilities. Maine children are falling behind.

A MACSP survey from last summer of more than 20 special purpose preschools found that while 100% of programs are carrying waitlists (350 children), an alarming 73% of programs had recently *reduced* their census and 64% have further reduced their capacity in the current 2022-2023 academic year. Multiple agencies have either closed preschool programs or are considering closing their programs next fall.

Waitlists are growing. The reduced capacity in these programs represents a devastating loss of access to federally required services for hundreds of Maine's children and their families, and a significant step backward from our shared goal of ensuring that every child has Free and Appropriate Public Education as defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Over the last few months our members have had constructive but inconclusive discussions with the Department and CDS regarding the need for tuition reimbursement for the educational supports provided to children for Special Purpose Preschools.

We look forward to further discussions with the Department and committee members regarding the forthcoming bill, LR 1003 *An Act To Clarify Requirements For Payment Of Tuition For Children With Disabilities By The Department Of Education's Child Development Services System Funding*, sponsored by Representative Drew Gattine, and ask that you work to identify and include the equitable funding needed to meet the educational needs of all of Maine's children in the budget.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please contact me with any questions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted,
Laura Cordes