



Testimony of Rita Furlow,
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Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
LD 258
Education Portion of State Biennial Budget
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Senator Rotundo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Sachs, Representative Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Rita Furlow. I am the Senior Policy Analyst at the Maine Children's Alliance. I offer testimony today in support of provisions in the proposed biennial budget that advance the education and well-being of Maine children and families. The Maine Children's Alliance, a statewide non-partisan, advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound public policy and best practices to improve the lives of children, youth, and families in Maine.

The future of our state literally depends on our ability to provide children with what they need to be ready and able to lead our communities tomorrow. Fortunately, what our children need is no longer a mystery. An explosion in the science of early childhood development has shown that the brain's architecture is built over time and from the bottom up, and early experiences and relationships are the building blocks.¹ Providing strong foundations in the early years is key to all the development that follows.

We know from research that the brain has the most plasticity, or capacity for change, during the first five years of life. For some young children their development progresses along a slower timetable or in an atypical manner. For those infants, toddlers, and children with a disability or developmental delay, intervening early can make all the difference in the world to their future outcomes.

In particular, we are supportive of the Department's continued efforts in the budget to utilize federal funds to support public preschool education in Maine. We are also pleased to see additional funding of approximately \$10 million dollars over the two-year budget to support the public preschool needs of children with disabilities.

¹ Center on the Developing Child (2007). *The Science of Early Childhood Development* (InBrief). Retrieved from www.devhcdc.wpengine.com

The process of locating, identifying, and evaluating children with disabilities and delays to ensure that they receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is referred to as “child find.”² Child Development Services, the state entity responsible for “child find” in Maine has an affirmative duty to identify children who may need early intervention and or special education services.

Federal law requires that infants and toddlers with diagnosed physical or mental conditions that have a high probability of resulting in developmental delays be automatically eligible for Early Intervention services. This is particularly important for infants with medical conditions to support their development in the critical first year. Children who are suspected of having a disability or developmental delay should be referred for an evaluation to determine if they are eligible for early intervention/special education services.

We continue to be concerned at the small number of children under the age of one who are found eligible and are receiving services under Maine’s CDS Early Intervention program. While the Department has made progress in the last few years, more must be done to find and serve these children as early as possible. Maine low percentage of eligible children is in part a result of our state’s decision to have one of the most restrictive eligibility criteria in the country for our youngest children. As was noted in an independent report from the Public Consulting Group in 2020, Maine is one of 16 states in the country with such restrictive eligibility.

While we are supportive of the additional funding requested by the Department to support Child Development Services, we hope members appreciate the extraordinary statement that the Department made to you today that the state is “out of compliance” with federal law under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. As members of the Education Committee know all too well, much needs to be done to improve the way our state finds and serves our youngest children with developmental delays.

We hope that the presentation from the Department can be the beginning of more work to improve the services to young children. If we don’t fix this problem, it’s like we’ve decided to build our future on a shaky foundation. Our children, families and communities deserve better than that. We need to work together to create innovative solutions to this critical problem.

Thank you for your consideration.

² Drago, K. (2019). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part C: Early Intervention for infants and toddlers with disabilities. Congressional Research Service. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43631.pdf>