TESTIMONY REGARDING
LD 1309 "An Act to Clarify Requirements for Payment of Tuition for Children with Disabilities by the Department of Education's Child Development Services System"

April 13, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, thank you for taking the time to hear testimony on this important bill.

My name is Hannah Pelletier, and I live in Westbrook. I am speaking today in strong support of LD 1309: An Act to Clarify Requirements for Payment of Tuition for Children with Disabilities by the Department of Education's Child Development Services System.

My husband and I have been licensed therapeutic foster parents for 13 years. In that time we have had seven kids graduate from special purpose preschools. Six from Woodfords in Westbrook and one from Shooting Stars in Scarborough. Today we have four kids living at home, all four have had IEPs at some point in their school careers for multiple different diagnoses.

My oldest biological child is 11 now but when she was at Woodfords she was in their inclusion classroom as a typically developing child. I remember being so proud when she was chosen to be a "social skills ambassador" where she would go to other classrooms to help her peers learn and practice. I truly believe the compassion and understanding she exhibits today can be traced back to her experience with neuro-divergent kids at a young age.

My nine year old was adopted from foster care. At three years old she was kicked out of daycare for biting and eloping from her classroom. We were able to get her into Woodfords and as her behaviors escalated as she grew up they were able to support us in getting her services and brainstorming ways to manage things at home. Today she is graduating the fourth grade and although her behaviors in previous years have caused her to fall slightly behind academically she has made huge gains in her ability to participate in school and she is becoming an amazing young lady.

My seven year old was also adopted from foster care. She received speech through CDS at her preschool and no longer qualifies for, or needs, services. Those early services allowed her to make the progress she needed to enter kindergarten with the ability to communicate her wants and needs.

My foster son came to us as an emergency placement after spending a month in a hotel room with a rotation of OCFS caseworkers. Our house was full at the time but we had a kiddo moving on to an adoptive home soon so we were able to squeeze him in. He had just turned four and come into state custody. He had been placed in two homes that I know of before us that had not been able to keep him longer than a few days due to his behaviors. He came to us with an autism diagnosis and some evaluations but no services. Only because Woodfords was able to take him on as a student were we able to keep him and stabilize him in our home where he has stayed for the last five years.

As a resource parent I'm required to do continuing education hours to keep up my license. If I have to attend another training that stresses the importance of early intervention I'm going to scream. We know early intervention works yet it can seem impossible to get for someone like me who knows how to navigate this system. I can't imagine what it must be like for a parent with a newly diagnosed child attempting to figure everything out while seeing their vision of the future change and then being told you'll be waiting months or years to get your child into appropriate care.

In my professional life I've worked inpatient with DD children in crisis. I see the results of not getting early intervention and support. Kids and families suffering and struggling to just get through the day safely.

In closing I want to tell you about two separate emergency placements we've had in the last six months. Again our home is full and again both of these kids have spent days and nights in hotels with OCFS caseworkers. Both had autism diagnoses. Neither was able to attend a typical preschool or childcare due to needing 1:1 support. My husband and I both work full time. Both these kids stayed with us for weeks, being cared for at the DHHS office during the day and coming back to our home in the evening. Had accessible preschool been available to them we would have considered keeping them in our home. But it was not, so both these kids have been placed out of district, making reunification harder for them and their families of origin. My ability to help is limited by the availability of services, services I see work on a daily basis and services our children need.

Thank you