

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.

I am asking you to support 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 name is Maureen Zemrak, and I live in Falmouth. I am a parent of three children who have graduated from the Woodfords Preschool Program. Our family’s journey in the world of specialized education began in 2014 when our son Grady was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Today, Grady is a non-verbal 10 year-old, currently in 4th Grade at Falmouth Elementary School. He continues to develop his communication and social interactions with teachers, peers and family with assistance from his Augmentative and Alternate Communication (AAC) device. I have no doubt, his tremendous gains in his communication and education began with amazing early intervention at his preschool. You can watch a video about my family’s experience with Woodfords here: <https://bit.ly/3KANrw6>.

Just shy of three years old, Grady was enrolled in the preschool program at the Woodfords’ Westbrook location. We immediately started to see tremendous growth in Grady. He began interacting with other peers in his classroom, his teachers, and was introduced to alternative communication methods, including PECS and eventually his AAC device. Those years were enlightening and hard, but relieving and full of support and optimism. I credit his teachers and all of the staff at the preschool for keeping our spirits bright. We knew how lucky we were to be there.

The day we went into the elementary school for Grady’s transition meeting, I could not believe how many people from the preschool joined us. My husband and I had no idea what we were doing, or how to advocate for our son, but no need to worry! His preschool teachers and therapists provided so much support on behalf of two naïve parents at their first major transition meeting from a specialized preschool of personalized attention and care, which we were petrified to leave, to a large public school system of many fish in a very large pond. Our Woodfords preschool teachers clearly knew my son and what he needed to thrive. They spread warmth and smiles throughout the room with their obvious love and devotion of my child’s well-being.

How do you help support the success of this organization and all these amazing preschool teachers and staff? My family is trying by showing up and being cheerleaders, just like they have always been for us. I have actively served on the Board of Trustees for Woodfords Family Services for almost five years. My company is an active sponsor, and all of our family and friends make sure to be at as many Woodfords events possible each year. All of the familiar faces still there, working day after day in a tough job, meant for such a kind-hearted person, is amazing to me. The preschool teachers and staff deserve medals every single day. They are the most special people in this world, and we need more of them. I will never feel like I can thank them enough for all of the love and support they have given us over the years. They truly have changed our family’s outcome. I wholeheartedly support the continued development and funding of these critical early intervention programs. Our families need them desperately.

Thank you for your time and allowing me to speak on behalf of our family and my son, Grady.