



Testimony of Scott Tash, Chief Executive Officer

In 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***

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

April 13, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Scott Tash, and I am the CEO at UCP of Maine. UCP of Maine has been serving individuals with a wide range of disabilities since 1954, and those services currently include programs for children 3 to 5 years old in center-based pre-school settings in the greater-Bangor area.

I also serve as a Board member for the Maine Association for Community Service Providers as Treasurer, and Chair of the Children's Committee and am pleased to offer this testimony in strong support of LD 1309 on behalf of our membership, our Children's Committee and my organization, UCP of Maine.

I want to thank Representative Gattine for bringing the bill forward and for the committee co-sponsors and legislators who have spoken in support of developing an equitable payment for the critical pre-school educational services that we provide to hundreds of Maine's most vulnerable children each year.

UCP of Maine has contracted with CDS and has served children in the Pre-K environment for approximately 20 years. During that time, we have enjoyed a strong, professional partnership with CDS, serving upwards of 50 pre-school children each year in our Bangor and Brewer locations. While we receive tuition reimbursement in our K-4 program for children with disabilities from the school districts we support, the state, which acts as the sending school for our pre-school program does not provide this. For many years, we have been able to overcome this obstacle by adjusting operations, or supporting these critical services with a diversified range of services in our organization. However, the significant wage pressure and increased costs of other operating expenses over the past several years has brought us to an un-sustainable position, and the under-funding has reached a point that is too difficult to overcome.

Additionally, this under-funding has put us at a significant disadvantage in terms of recruitment and retention, commonly losing staff for teacher or ed tech positions at public schools with more robust compensation packages.

As we have had to diversify services to subsidize pre-school, this has come at the cost of reducing the number of pre-school aged children served by 20% year over year. This is disheartening as we currently, and consistently, have as many children on our waitlist as we are serving at any one time, last count being 50 children waiting to receive services. A critical piece of note is over 30% of these children will be turning aged 5 or 6 and may be transitioning to public school without ever having had pre-school programming identified as being needed in their IEP plan. They are missing the Early Interventions that we all agree are critical and have a significant impact on a child's ability to learn new skills and overcome challenges that can increase success in school and life. To emphasize real impacts, I've highlighted some recent feedback from parents of children in our pre-schools, which include:

"Thank you to all who have been a part of my child's care, we would not be where we are today without your kindness, patience, compassion, and support."

And from another:

"Our son's social and verbal skills have blossomed since beginning the Bridges program at UCP. Friends and family can hardly believe how much he has improved. We're confident that he will shine in kindergarten."

The last sentence is our goal of the pre-school program, to give kids with various challenges the best opportunity to thrive during their next educational steps.

Providing the educational related payments would support the ability to continue serving existing students while supporting the opening of additional classrooms and get many of these waiting children the early interventions they need, potentially allowing for less support later on in their educational journey.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted,

Scott Tash

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