

**Testimony of Tiffany McKenna
Before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
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 Tiffany McKenna. I am the mother of two eight year old girls and a ten year old boy in Falmouth, Maine. My son Tucker is a child with a disability who qualified for Child Development Services.

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 & Child Development Services System.

When Tucker was two and a half he went to a wonderful preschool called Creative Playhouse. The teachers there quickly noticed many things that made it hard for Tucker to interact and function well at their school. He had a hard time communicating and interacting with people yet could memorize Dr. Seuss books and repeat the stories line by line. The teachers couldn’t get him to sit at circle time or do any of the other group activities. He was very smart and able to count to one hundred by three years old, yet had no sense of danger and would often bolt into the street. He had a very hard time with any transition in his day. The preschool teachers helped me set up testing through Child Development Services. After several days of testing the team of people met with my husband and I with the results. Our smart and energetic son was diagnosed with high functioning autism.

At first we were very overwhelmed with the diagnosis but CDS was very helpful. They helped us get Tucker into Woodfords Preschool in Westbrook. Being in a specialized preschool was life-changing for Tucker as a regular preschool was not able to handle him. In his time at Woodford’s preschool he made an amazing amount of progress. The staff there got him like no one else could. The experience also opened my eyes to many other resources that changed the way we parent. When my son was being very aggressive and violent they suggested I take a class called “Safety Care” at Woodfords Family Services which helped me deal with the self harm and aggression at home. They were also experts in dealing with other issues like a limited

diet, helping him learn to do things for himself, and helping potty train him. They helped us reduce symptoms that interfered with his daily functioning and quality of life. Autism Spectrum Disorder affects each person differently, meaning that people with ASD have unique strengths and challenges and different treatment needs, only a specialized preschool could handle this.

Time and time again, studies have shown that the early diagnosis and intervention of autism near preschool age is more likely to have major long-term positive effects on symptoms and the development of later skills. The sooner a child can start behavioral therapy, the more likely they are to make progress in regards to their skills later on in life.

It's now been seven years since Tucker was diagnosed and I can happily report he has made so much progress. When he entered that preschool he wouldn't look anyone in the eye, now he interacts well with others. After his time there he stopped repeating scripted dialogue he had memorized and started having conversations. His self harm with head-banging and biting himself went down dramatically and I learned how to deal with that. He learned many social thinking tools that help him to keep his mind and body with the group plan and we still use the same language of Michelle Garcia Winner that we learned at Woodford's Preschool in our home. We have learned that Tucker works best with a structure and a strict routine. It was incredible that Tucker was able to attend Woodfords preschool year round till kindergarten. If he had a public preschool he wouldn't have had the year round care.

Thanks to Woodfords Preschools Tucker made remarkable gains in the areas of communication, adaptive functioning and reduction in problem behaviors. It's amazing that he was able to do his speech and occupational therapies at school, saving a lot of time, not to mention the heartache of doctor's visits gone wrong. The role of early detection of developmental delays, autism and mental health issues is essential in the short and long term functioning and potential of these children. If Tucker had not benefited from these highly specialized and intensive services he would not be the child he is today. I am concerned that without this bill special needs kids wouldn't get the opportunities that Tucker had. Early interventions not only give children the best start possible, but also the best chance of developing to their full potential. The sooner a child gets help, the greater the chance for learning and progress.

Every child deserves educational services that will help them reach his or her full potential. Every child needs a strategy for success. Thank you for the opportunity to tell my family's story today. I hope you will support LD 1309 to give all children with disabilities the early intervention services they need.