

**Testimony of Kelly Kierstead, Lewiston, ME  
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. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of LD 1309.

My name is Kelly Kierstead and I am here today to stress the importance of special purpose preschools. My son, Oliver, was diagnosed with autism when he was two. ~~From the beginning, we were told that the best thing we could do for our son was provide early intervention.~~ From the beginning, we were told that the best thing we could do for our son was provide early intervention. In the book given to us by CDS, *An Early Start for Your Child with Autism*, it states that the more progress in preschool years, the fewer disabilities children with autism have later. By beginning intervention as soon as possible, we are able to capitalize on the tremendous plasticity of the brain at this time and minimize the disabilities associated with autism. Once we had diagnosis for Oliver in hand, I started calling preschools. Many wouldn't put him on a waiting list until he was 3, and shared the waiting list was at least a year. As a parent who has been told that the success of your child may lie in these few short years, it is like anxiously watching an hour glass. If your child needed a medical treatment, and it was recommended to begin now, but the lack of doctors pushed it two years ahead, we would find that unacceptable...yet with our kids, they wait for the essential services provided in the preschool setting, sometimes for years. It is helpless feeling. Parenting can be a challenge with any kid, but navigating the system that is unable to respond to your child's needs is exhausting.

Seven months after my son's diagnosis, we were able to get into an ABA program in South Portland commuting from Lewiston. The following September, now a year after his diagnosis, he was able to get into an actual school, Essential Learning Solutions, in Lisbon. Once there he flourished. He started potty training, he was identifying shapes, every week it was something new. We had an 8-month reprieve. Then in June, we were told Ollie's school was closing due to lack of staffing and funding. His father and I were in tears upon receiving this news. This meant he was losing *all* the therapies he was getting at school: PT, speech, OT. Again, we began our search, trying to piece together some sort of treatment. I called Little Pines the afternoon I learned his school was closing, getting him on a waitlist. He started there in October of 2022. For now, we breathe, knowing he is where he should be. He is 4. He drew an H this week all by himself, and he is slowly learning his shapes again. He lost a lot of progress with the months out of school and completely different staff, but he is where he is supposed to be, where all our kids are supposed to be. Where every specialist, the CDC and experts say he is supposed to be, yet under the current system the state of Maine cannot meet those needs. Our kids will grow into adults that will face challenges throughout their entire lives, doing daily activities we take for granted. Please, support LD 1309 and give our kids the best foundation to live their best lives.

I would like to add that I am coming from a place of relative privilege. We are a two-parent family with one child. I have a salary job that allows flexibility and working from home. I work in this field and have

resources within my personal life and career to assist us with our journey. We have two cars and the finances for gas to transport our child to schools out of town, even when we were not getting the mileage reimbursement to the private school in South Portland. We have been able to move to the top of a waiting list because we had the ability to provide transportation. Transportation is a huge barrier and lack of local preschools only adds to this challenge. Most parents are not in our situation They have other children. They have inflexible work schedules and second jobs. We spend two hours a day transporting our son. Our experience, I do not believe, is typical. I think ours is optimistic and that many families are lost in this system, depending on caseworkers who have too many clients on their plate and possibly little help at all as they wait for a door to open and their child to get the services they desperately need. I believe there is an inequality in the services children receive based on their income and that should not be. There are 60 children on the waiting list at my son's preschool. Most of them will age out of preschool and start kindergarten with no skills. These are kids that need extra and they are getting less. It is an inequality of the most vulnerable.

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

Respectfully Submitted,

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