



Jeffrey Johnson, LCSW, MBA

Executive Director, Children's Center

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 Educational and Cultural Affairs. I appreciate the opportunity to offer my comments in support of LD 1309.

My name is Jeffrey Johnson, and I am a Clinician and the Executive Director of the Children's Center. The Children's Center has been providing services to pre-k children for over 50 years. I've been working with children in the behavioral health and education field for almost 40 years. We have pre-k programming in Augusta, Skowhegan, and Farmington, providing center-



based pre-k services to about 100 kids with disabilities. We have a waitlist of roughly 150 children with disabilities. Recently we closed a pre-k program for children with disabilities in Waterville. Insufficient funding meant our small program there could no longer operate with high standards. We chose to close it rather than compromise our standards.

We live in the best time in history to learn about learning. Interesting to me is how young kids learn. Most interesting to me is how young children with disabilities learn. To know a fair amount about that it helps to know a little about neurological development.

Think about your own children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, when they were first born. They couldn't roll over, couldn't crawl, couldn't hold anything, couldn't understand anything, couldn't stand up, couldn't feed themselves, etc. Not much seemingly going on. But inside their brains, 84 billion neurons with information and instructions were looking to travel to millions of destinations in the brain. And so, unlike any other time in life, 25



quadrillion neurotransmitter combinations are organized at a speed we can't comprehend. By 6 years old 95% of those neurotransmitter pathways are complete.

Want to be a concert pianist? Your best learning opportunity is before your 6th birthday. Want to learn 10 languages- your fastest/best learning will happen before your 6th birthday.

A newborn with a cognitive disability does not have the ability to organize and construct neurotransmitter pathways the way a typical child does. A child with autism at five may very well be nonverbal- a long way from the 13,000 words his 6 year old classmate uses. Is the child with autism sounding out words? No. Identifying shapes/counting numbers? Understanding letters and their connection to communication? Nope. And that's because neurotransmitter pathways didn't get created to bring neurons to parts of the brain responsible for speech development, visual assimilation, socialization, decoding words, auditory processing, understanding,



identifying, and communicating ideas and emotions. None of this developed because neurons couldn't/can't get to parts of the brain the way they need to.

But it is a wonderful time to work with young children with cognitive disabilities. The past 25 years an impressive body of research has identified evidence-based specialized curriculums and interventions for pre-k children with disabilities. When providers use evidence-based approaches, significant neurotransmitter growth and culling is possible. But the work must take place in the early years to take full advantage of the explosive growth that is taking place. Evidence shows the results can grow adults that often live full, rich, independent lives that are fully a part of their communities. Mainers need to fund these little kids with big challenges, it's the right thing to do.

Jeffrey Johnson, LCSW, MBA

Executive Director, Children's Center

(207)626-3497, jjohnson@childrensctr.org