

## 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 listen to my story.

My name is Amanda Gale, and I live in Freeport.

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.

Our son Henry is a happy, easygoing 5 year old and he has truly thrived in his early intervention program at Woodfords Preschool at Pineland. He has attended Woodfords for a little over two years and he has made so many gains which have truly changed our lives.

He was born a healthy baby and life rolled along just as it did with our first child with all the daily joys and tears that any parent of a newborn feels. It became clear at around 12 months that Henry was developing differently than his sibling. He ran on about 4 hours of sleep per day (and continues to do so), seemed distant, never responded to his name and was very hard to engage. He was later diagnosed with SCN2A related Autism Spectrum Disorder.

We quickly began juggling a multitude of outpatient physical therapy, speech therapy and occupational therapy sessions, in-home interventions, specialist appointments all the while trying to manage a family life and full time jobs. Those early years were a slog. It was hard and oftentimes incredibly isolating. We found ourselves in the unknown, up all night mourning the future that we imagined he would have, wondering if we would ever hear his voice and worrying about his safety as he begins to navigate a world that often feels not yet ready for people like him.

When Henry finally got off the waitlist for a specialized day school, our path started to feel a lot brighter. We were now surrounded by a crew of special educators and therapists, under one roof, who not only became Henry's teachers, but some of his loudest cheerleaders. I remember our first day visiting the school to check it out and my husband and I were in awe that a place like this even existed where everyone in the room was fully dedicated to the success of each child there. It was a magical space. In one area you had a child working on hand strengthening with their OT, another child in their speech session beginning to conquer the early stages of communication and another child working on using the stairs without having to rely on the hand railing with their PT.

Throughout his time there, they have shown nothing but complete dedication to our son's development, health and happiness and the flexibility needed with any neurodivergent child where one size never fits all. With their motivation, expertise and friendship, Henry now has the foundations and skills needed to reach his fullest potential moving into kindergarten and beyond.

Studies show that a child’s lifelong well-being is positively associated with early education and we should be advocating for as many diversified learning opportunities as possible.

And while I don't know what Henry's future holds, I do know that we will sleep soundly at night knowing that lawmakers everywhere are stepping up to do everything in their power to ensure that programs like Woodford's remain in place for children like Henry for years to come.