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Testimony of Representative Drew Gattine presenting

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

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and my distinguished colleagues on the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Drew Gattine and I am honored to represent parts of the communities of Saco, Scarborough and Westbrook in the Maine House. I am pleased to appear before you this afternoon to present **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.**

I am very excited to bring this bill to you today because it provides an important opportunity to improve and protect the educational opportunities for very young children across our state. It will help them out in a way that will benefit them for the rest of their lives and put them on track to have the best educational experience possible as they move through our school systems and into adulthood. I'm confident that is a goal that we all share.

Specifically, this bill seeks to cure an inequity in the funding for preschool services for children with special needs who attend special purpose schools. The inequity exists with respect to children who are on MaineCare. For children who are on MaineCare, educational services for those *in K-12 programs* are reimbursed by the school district in which they reside, otherwise known as "the sending school." Therapeutic and other medically necessary services for the same students are paid for by MaineCare. However, services for children who receive *pre-K in special purpose schools* do not include any reimbursement for the educational component of the services they receive, the providers of services only receive some payment from MaineCare for therapeutic and medically necessary services.

The State is required under federal law to provide educational services for children with disabilities beginning at age three and, with respect to children on MaineCare – who comprise a large percentage of children receiving services in special purpose schools – it is not currently meeting this obligation.

This funding imbalance is clearly having a negative impact on the availability of these critical preschool services for children who need them to get ready for kindergarten and beyond. You will hear testimony following me from the Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP), an organization whose members include the providers of these preschool programs. Last summer, MACSP did a survey of the educational providers of these services. Eleven providers responded from across the state representing 24 preschool programs, serving nearly 600 kids. It was found that 100% of these preschools currently had waitlists for services and 75% reported that they had reduced the number of children they were teaching. The funding imbalance is having a critical impact because these pre-K programs can't offer wages that compete with K-12 programs that receive greater reimbursement.

You will also hear testimony today from families and teachers who will describe to you much better than I can the importance of these services in the development and well-being of the children who need them.

This bill is pretty straightforward in what it seeks to accomplish. It requires the Department of Education through Child Development Services (CDS) to make resources available for the educational component of the services that these preschool students receive. It directs CDS to work with providers to develop appropriate rates for these services in advance of the 2023-24 school year.

We need to support the children who desperately need these services and their families and the educators who have taken on the tough task of getting these young students ready for kindergarten. We can't afford to allow these programs to close or shrink. It would be a tremendous injustice for these children and a huge loss for our state. I hope this will gain your support, and I'd be happy to answer any questions.

Thank you.