



Testimony of Laura Cordes, Executive Director

Governor's Change Package to LD 258: An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisionsfor the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

**Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
May 16, 2023**

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee.

My name is Laura Cordes. I am the Executive Director for the Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP). MACSP is the statewide association of 85 agencies providing person centered and individualized educational, vocational, residential and community supports, as well as specialized services and care to thousands of children and adults who have either intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, or brain injuries, so that they may live full and meaningful lives in the community.

In February I was in front of this committee asking that you include funding in the Department of Education CDS budget to establish tuition reimbursement for the educational supports provided to children, ages three - five years old with disabilities in Special Purpose Preschools.

Ensuring payment for special purpose preschools will fix a significant funding inequity between Special Purpose Preschools and Special Purpose K-12 schools that we have been grappling with for years. As it stands, Special Purpose K-12 schools receive tuition reimbursement for the educational services they provide from the sending school district, as well as payment for the therapeutic and medically necessary services from MaineCare. Special Purpose Preschools however do not receive a payment from CDS for the educational services they provide only a payment for the therapeutic and medically necessary services from MaineCare.

The lack of payment and funding disparity has led to rapidly shrinking census, and a collapse of programs, and agonizingly long waitlists for families and children throughout the state.

A survey of our members who operate and work with children in Special Purpose Preschools found that several providers have closed programs or plan to close them at the end of the school year if payment for educational services are not secured.

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The reduced capacity in these programs represents a devastating loss of access to federally required services for hundreds of Maine's children and their families, and a significant step backward from our shared goal of ensuring that every child has Free and Appropriate Public Education as defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Time has run out for far too many families and the clock is ticking for hundreds more who will continue to lose critical ground if we do not address the problem this session.

As providers of services for people with disabilities of all ages, we know what a critical difference early intervention and education makes in a child's life and into adulthood. The testimony you will hear from parents today, underscores the difference that specialized instruction and support make through these schools, the progress and positive changes they see in their children, and the need to act now.

I'm glad to share that 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*, sponsored by Representative Drew Gattine, will direct the Department to work with providers to establish a payment. LD 1309 has passed out of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee with unanimous bi-partisan support. We have had constructive conversations with the Department as well and are awaiting the fiscal note.

Including equitable funding for pre-school children with special needs in the budget will not only keep vital programming and schools in place but will immediately give providers with shuttered classrooms the ability to serve an estimated 45% more children than they are currently supporting. That's upwards of an additional 300 children from our members alone.

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

Respectfully Submitted,
Laura Cordes