

*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 Provisions....for 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 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 between age 2 and 5. I started calling preschools but many wouldn't put him on a waiting list until he was 3, and shared the waiting list was at least a year. When you are told 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 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 sometimes for years. It is a helpless feeling.

A year after his diagnosis, Ollie started at special purpose preschool. He flourished. He started potty training, identifying shapes and using PECs to create sentences. We had an 8-month reprieve. Then in June, we were told Ollie's school was closing due to lack of staffing and funding. They called me while Ollie and I were on vacation and I remember pulling over at a rest stop and calling his dad and we cried. He would be losing school and *all* the therapies he was getting at school: PT, OT and speech. Again, we started trying to piece together some sort of treatment plan. Oliver started preschool again last October, He is one of the lucky ones. For now, we breathe, knowing he is where he is supposed to be, where all of our kids are supposed to be. Where every specialist and the CDC say they are supposed to be, yet under the current system, the state of Maine cannot meet their needs. There are 60 kids on the waiting list at my son's preschool and most of them will age out of preschool and start kindergarten with no skills to prepare them. It took 16 months for my son to succeed at circle time. These are kids that need extra and they are getting less. It is an inequality of the most vulnerable. Our kids grow into adults that will face challenges throughout their entire lives. I work with adults with disabilities. I see the inability to communicate result in self-injurious behavior such as head banging on concrete floors. Why? They have a tooth ache. They were hot. Sometime we never know, because they had no way to tell us because they were never given the opportunity to learn how. And now, at 35, we are trying to teach someone how to use PECs, when the idea is foreign to them. It is hard to say this out loud, but suicide is one of the leading causes of death for autistic adults. We know from research that these challenges can lessen with preschool intervention. It can literally be life or death. We need to capitalize on these few short years to

lessen a life time of challenges. Please, fund LD 1309 in the budget and give our kids the best foundation to live their best lives.

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

Respectfully Submitted,

Kelly Kierstead  
kkierstead@spurwink.org