**Testimony of Kelly Kierstead**

**In Support of LD 2120**

***An Act to Fund the Delivery of Educational Services to Children with Special Needs as Required by State and Federal Law in Special Purpose Private Preschools***

**Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs**
**January 31, 2024**

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of LD 2120 *An Act to Fund the Delivery of Educational Services to Children with Special Needs as Required by State and Federal Law in Special Purpose Private Preschools*

My name is Kelly Kierstead. My son, Oliver, attends Special Purpose Preschool. I want to thank Representative Gattine and committee co-sponsors for bringing the bill forward, as well as the entire committee for taking the first step to establish an equitable payment for the critical educational services that special purpose preschools provide to hundreds of Maine's most vulnerable children each year.

This is my third time testifying in relation to Special Purpose Preschool. The first two times were regarding LD 1309. I am here again today to support LD 2120, to ensure that preschools continue to be paid for the work they do to our children during those most important years, ages 2-5, when early intervention is most vital.

As I testified last spring, before many of you in this this room, my son Oliver was diagnosed with level three autism the week he turned two. When we got that diagnosis, we were told by every professional, including the CDC that his brain was growing and early intervention was imperative to him living his best life. We knew that from the moment that we got his diagnosis that this would at times be a difficult path and it was this early intervention that would assist with communication, which in turn affects everything else. I work in this field, and I see firsthand the complications and stress as well as self injurious behavior that can occur when there a person cannot communicate basic needs, like whether they are in pain or even thirsty. Like so many parents of special need kiddos, we started piecing together services and going on any wait list we could for special purpose preschools. It would take seven months before we got in anywhere, with our journey starting at private ABA center in South Portland. We were commuting 2.5 hours a day. My agency allowed me to work part time from Portland, an accommodation most business could not offer. We were thrilled when we started actual preschool at Essential Learning Solutions in Lisbon when he was 3 in 2021. He flourished. He learned shapes, matching and was even potty training. He is clever, and quickly moved through the stages of PECs. He was talking to us through these pictures, his first words. When we got the news, eight months later in June of 2022, that the preschool was closing due to funding, we were devasted. His teacher shared with us that the funding system was unsustainable. That August he lost his education including Speech, PT and OT. The early intervention was now on us, trying our best to give him a fraction of the services he lost. That October, we heard from Little Pines, a preschool in Monmouth. We jumped over ten other families on the wait list simply because we could provide transportation. We started again. I want to share that it is a little different with a kid like Ollie. We didn't start off where we were back in August. We started fresh. Potty training, matching shapes. New staff, new routines, new environment. When you have a child that doesn't speak and cannot express themselves in a traditional way, every new start requires the staff to learn his sounds, his expressions, his actions, and learn who he is. For the first 3 months at any school, I hear "Well, we are still trying to figure Ollie out". And my boy regresses, a little each time. But the months went on, and Ollie once again began to blossom. We opted for a second year of preschool as he was eligible. He made some heart connections there, some that still remain, and we got an AAC, a tablet to speak, opening new doors to communication. Less than a year later, we got the call that Little Pines, my son's third school, was closing due to funding. It was, according to the director, not sustainable. I knew that the bill LD1309 had passed. I sent her all the information I could sharing that payment was possibly coming in November. She said they had not heard when they would be paid but they just couldn't wait any longer. The decision had been made. Here we were again, with Ollie losing his friends, his teachers, speech, OT, PT. Given the connections he had made there, what hurt our hearts the most was the lack of closure for our boy. There was no explanation he would understand or the ability to say good bye. His life changed overnight.

I got a call that week from the Margaret Murphy Center sharing I had made my way to the top of the wait list at their special purpose preschool. We had applied in 2020, and again in 2021. Over two years we waited. Had I not had the ability to transport my child, work in another city or bring him to school in another town, we would likely have spent most of that time with no services at all and he would be at square one years behind his peers. Our experience, I believe, is not typical. Ollie was our miracle baby and our only young child. We put all of our energy and focus into him. If I had other children, other kiddos with special needs or a job as a healthcare worker doing shiftwork, I would not have had ability to give my son the opportunity I did. It seems that the most vulnerable kids have the least opportunity to navigate the system due to their circumstances. Again, we are the lucky ones.

We started at MMC in October. His team is fantastic and they are trying to figure him out like all the schools before. The upheaval of the life of a boy who thrives in the familiar has had notable detrimental effects. Oliver, once almost potty trained at 3, stopped using the bathroom all together at school when he started MMC, requiring trips to the urologist from holding his urine up to 20 hours. Up until last week he was drinking just 2oz a day. His matching goals are closer to 0% than the 40% they were. His daily Self Injurious Behavior has doubled. This is no fault of the school, but I believe, the result of a frustrated child who yet again has to show another group of adults who he is, with no words to do so. Their little lives have enough challenges with so many more ahead. Please, ensure that these schools stay open and that our kids who have found their safe, familiar place in one of Maine's wonderful special purpose preschools get to stay there and continue to receive the early intervention that gives them their best chance.

At a time when Maine is out of compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and hundreds of families and children are already on waitlists for specialized early education services, we cannot afford to lose well established and well-respected programs and hundreds of spots that could change the lives and trajectory for children with disabilities.

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

Respectfully Submitted,
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