

TESTIMONY REGARDING

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

January 31, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Allyson Lowell, and I am the Chief Clinical Officer at Woodfords Family Services. I am testifying in support of LD 2120. Woodfords is a nonprofit organization committed to the support and inclusion of individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities and their families. We are a leader in the provision of early intervention and specialized preschool services throughout the state. I also proudly testify as the mother of four children, two of whom received significant early intervention services. Our family will be forever grateful for the services we received and the way they have impacted our children's long term success. One of these children will be graduating with his Master's degree in May and the other thriving in a mainstream 5th grade classroom.

Woodfords, along with a coalition of providers and families, testified to this committee in the previous session regarding LD 1309, a bill to require the MDOE to provide equitable funding for Pre-K educational services, similar to the funding provided for K-12 services. Thank you for unanimously supporting and championing this bill. The result was a one-time \$15 million authorization in the current state budget to pay providers a daily tuition rate which has allowed us to keep our doors open and serve more children. LD 2120 ensures that providers will continue to receive a daily tuition rate of \$125 per child until a permanent rate is established.

The impact of your leadership on this issue last session has been profound for Woodfords and children waiting for services.

Five years ago, Woodfords was one of the largest providers of specialized preschool services in the state. We served 140 children across three schools. After years of significant financial losses that threatened the viability of the entire agency, we made the difficult decision to drastically limit enrollment, and no longer take new admissions. We sent a letter to the Commissioner of Education informing the state of our intention to close the program in 2024 unless there was a change in the state funding structure. We closed our wait list of more than 100 families. Our census dwindled to just 35 children. It was heartbreaking.

After the last legislative session and the passage of the state budget with a one-time allocation to provide a daily tuition rate for preschool students, we immediately changed course. We reopened admissions and increased our capacity to serve children with autism and other developmental disabilities by 89%. We called families who had previously been on our wait list, invited them to tour the program, and enrolled their children in services.

We stabilized our workforce with long overdue pay increases. We gave teachers and support staff up to 25% in wage increases. Applications for open positions more than tripled and we

have been steadily bringing on new staff to support newly enrolled students since the start of the school year in September. But, we have a long way to go as a provider community. Our new wait list already has 77 children on it.

When the state made the commitment to invest in preschool services in the current budget, we immediately pivoted to increase our service capacity, even before receiving any of the promised funding. This service means a lot to the core of our mission and those we serve. LD 2120 will ensure that we can continue to rebuild and provide critical early intervention services. Providers like Woodfords need long-term, consistent funding to stabilize and expand programs for some of the most vulnerable children in our state.

Thank you for supporting our advocacy last session, and I urge you to continue to support this effort on behalf of hundreds of children and families across the state.