



Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Members of the Educational and Cultural Affairs Committee

RE: LD 2166 An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder

My name is Carrie Woodcock I live in Saco, I am the parent of two children with different abilities, (disabilities) and the Executive Director for Maine Parent Federation (MPF). MPF is the federally funded Parent Training and Information Center (PTI), Family to Family Health Information Center (F2FHIC) and Statewide Family Network. We assist families of children with different abilities to navigate all systems of care including education. I am submitting this testimony in support of LD 2166 An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities (I/DD) or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The end goal of education is to identify areas of interest and expertise for employment. How many times do we ask our students “what do you want to be when you grow up?” I have heard this same question posed to my daughter and today you heard her answers, not different at all from any other 16-year-old. I always challenge those who are asking the question to think about how they are feeling when Sami provides those answers versus how you feel when a “typically” developing individual answers that question. Then ask yourself why?

According to statistics from Think College individuals with I/DD and/or ASD who have some type of post-secondary experience increase their chances of employment from 17% to 48%. Those numbers are remarkable yet we are not providing that opportunity in most of our state.

As of the Fall of 2023 Maine has one program within one Institute of Higher Education (IHE) for students with I/DD and/or ASD compared to 29 accredited college programs. We are also currently offering graduating seniors from Maine two free years of Community College. At the one program in Maine there is very limited financial assistance. This is an equity and access issue.

St. Joseph’s College has broken a glass ceiling in our state and should be commended for taking on the responsibility and acknowledging that YES these students CAN. However, the barriers of funding for attendance remains for families with an estimated cost of \$40,000/year. This program does not grant a degree for participants and therefore students are not eligible for financial aid through FAFSA. St. Joseph’s has recently applied for and been granted accreditation to offer grants to these students but there remains a large gap in funding leaving a financial burden which most families are not able to shoulder. This bill will offer IHE across the state the opportunity to apply for grant funding to not only create programming but also offer scholarships to students to attend.

The creation of more programs will provide opportunities to both our students who have graduated and/or aged out of our public schools and to those 18-22-year-olds still enrolled. It will also address some of the challenges of school districts providing appropriate programs to our 18-22-year-olds within their Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Creating programs at IHE open the opportunity for local school districts to enter into dual enrollment agreements which will address LRE challenges. In addition IDEA money can be leveraged for funding, a model currently being used widely in MA.



Students eligible for funding through our Vocational Rehabilitation programs whose employment goals are supported by a post-secondary opportunity can use some of that funding for attendance at IHE programs.

Finally, our state is in the process of creating what is referred to as a Lifespan waiver. If determined eligible individual's waiver support will begin at the age of 14. Currently, being considered within this waiver is providing funding for wrap around support to attend programming at an IHE.

We are building the structure within our state to create a sustainable funding model for individuals with I/DD and/or ASD to have the opportunity to attend a program at an IHE. We know the outcomes when they do attend are much more positive for the individual but for the entire community. What we need now is to give the IHE in our state the opportunity to create these programs.

It is for these reasons I urge the committee to please support LD 2166.

Thank you for your consideration.
Carrie Woodcock