

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 Audrey Bartholomew and I live in Portland. I have worked in a variety of professional positions in the field of disabilities including as a special education teacher and currently, Associate Professor of Special Education and the Maine LEND training director which is a training program for professionals in the disability world. However, my testimony is reflective of my own personal beliefs and not my place of employment.

As I drove to Augusta this morning with my 13 year old daughter, who is getting ready to enter high school next year, we had the opportunity to talk about her future plans. Since I work at a university, we talk about college a lot. Right now she's pretty sure she wants to go to college and major in art and then open her own tattoo studio. And those conversations are happening all over Maine with teenagers. However, we know there is one group this conversation is not happening with and that's teenagers with developmental disabilities.

For as long as we can remember, college has not been an option for students with developmental disabilities. However, within the past twenty years we have seen program supporting these students open up at a variety of institutions nationwide. As an undergraduate student studying special education, I did a practicum rotation in one and as a graduate student working on my masters in special education, I worked in the start of one of these programs. Nationwide, there are now over 300 programs supporting students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

It has been exciting to see this movement grow over the course of my career. We know these programs are instrumental in helping young adults improve their life outcomes. Right now, research indicates one of every 6-7 young adults with developmental disabilities obtains employment after high school. When we look at young adults who complete inclusive postsecondary programs, that number jumps to **one out of every two** individuals. This is not just a benefit to that individual but also our state and economy. A job is being filled and there is less dependence on financial support from the state.

However, here in the state of Maine, we have one truly inclusive postsecondary program at St. Joseph's college. It's my understanding the enrollment is very very low primarily due to the cost of attending college for these students. Because students with developmental disabilities are not working towards a traditional degree, they are ineligible for most forms of financial aid. Therefore, the cost of these programs is a barrier to the majority of Mainers.

Stakeholders across the state have formed a coalition to support the work for this movement here in Maine. We are working with vocational rehabilitation, the life span waiver, and also helping families understand this is an option, and hopefully in the future, an affordable one. There is a lot of excitement and momentum around these programs here in Maine and this bill would be key to seeing these programs become an option for all students with developmental disabilities. I ask you to please support LD 2166.

Thank you,
Audrey Bartholomew, PhD