

**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**

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

My name is MaryElizabeth Filon, and I am from Falmouth. Currently, I am pursuing my Master of Public Health at the University of New England and am a trainee in the Maine Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) program. My testimony represents my own views and I urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 2166.

For many students with intellectual or developmental disability or autism spectrum disorder, learning in a structured educational environment ends with the transition out of high school. The pilot program proposed in this bill benefits not just students with intellectual or developmental disability or autism spectrum disorder but the whole postsecondary educational community as well.<sup>1</sup> Faculty report better job satisfaction and a positive increase in the classroom environment and for students without disability, exposure to diverse abilities and experiences helps develop empathy, increased comfort and acceptance of people with disability, and increased awareness of career opportunities.

The grant funding model allows for the creative development of programming that permits a student-centered development of skills associated with increased mental health, including increased self-esteem, confidence, self-advocacy skills, and independence. Students enrolled in pilot programs funded by this bill would be able to develop both hard and soft skills needed for employment. Studies have shown a connection between postsecondary education and improved employment outcomes for students with intellectual or developmental disability or autism spectrum disorder.<sup>2</sup> A good job is an opportunity to have better quality of life by reducing financial dependence on others, increasing autonomy, and promoting social participation. These are all drivers of comprehensive health and wellness.

Reducing barriers to postsecondary education allows students with intellectual or developmental disabilities or autism spectrum disorder to participate more fully in social and academic spheres that we know has lifelong health and wellness benefits. Currently, there are only 154 postsecondary education programs nationwide that are able to provide financial aid as a Comprehensive Transition Program. Maine has one at St. Joseph's College. By offering inclusive programs for students, postsecondary educational programs here in Maine can qualify for Comprehensive Transition Program status; this would allow access to need-based federal financial aid and grants. Additionally, LD2166 establishes scholarships for students. Offering affordable educational opportunities opens up a new world of possibility.<sup>1</sup>

Please vote Ought to Pass on LD 2166. Thank you.

1. Scheef A, Hollingshead A, Barrio B. Supporting students with intellectual and developmental disability in postsecondary education. *J Coll Stud Dev.* 2020;61(4):528-531. doi:10.1353/csd.2020.0044

2. Zhang D, Roberts E, Maddalozzo R, Li YF, Orsag M, Glass T. Post-secondary education outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities: Self-determination, independent living, employment, and the impact of COVID-19. *Behav Sci (Basel).* 2023;13(10). doi:10.3390/bs13100832

3. College search. Think College. [https://thinkcollege.net/college-search?f%5B0%5D=tc\\_financial\\_aid%3AYes](https://thinkcollege.net/college-search?f%5B0%5D=tc_financial_aid%3AYes)