

## **Educational and Cultural Affairs Committee**

### **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**

January 31, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and Members of the Committee:

My name is Kasey McBlais and I live in Buckfield. I am here to support the passage of LD 2166. I am an alumni of the Maine State Parent Ambassador program, I work for the A Family for ME program, recruiting foster and adoptive families for the state, and I am currently in the NH-ME Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) program. I am the mother of a sassy 3.5 year old and an amazing 6 year old, named Remi. Remi was diagnosed with Autism and ADHD about two years ago.

My passion and advocacy thus far, has been centered around childcare and early education, mainly because of the ages of my children. However, as my family has navigated a society and its systems that are built primarily around neurotypical individuals, I've come to realize how important it is to stand up for the disability community.

It's true, that my Remi will likely be able to receive a postsecondary education with minimal accommodations, however, the same cannot be said for many others. Every human being, despite their different abilities should have an equal and accessible right to education. This should be a fundamental right. Statistics from Think College show that employment opportunities increase from 17% to 48% when individuals with I/DD and/or Autism have access to a postsecondary experience. This leads to more positive outcomes for both the individual and the entire community.

Try, if you would, to imagine yourself as a parent of an Autistic child. Or as a parent of a child with an intellectual disability. After educating yourself on your child's disability – reading all the books, listening to all the podcasts, joining support groups, you then find yourself having to fight tooth and nail for your child's basic right to be included in society. You get on all the waitlists for a therapist, for OT, for in-home support, for in-school support. You go down the med management rabbit hole which can take months finding the right medication. You find yourself fully immersed in a world you had never imagined. You're exhausted from having to convince people and systems and society that just because your child has different abilities, it does not make them any less of a child. And then your child gets older and wants to go to college and you still want what is best for your child. We all want the best for our children; for them to grow up in a world where inclusion, equity, autonomy and access isn't something that has to be voted in. Investing in our youth now, will only save resources, time, and money in the future. Children and equal access should not be negotiating points.

I implore you to vote in support of LD 2166. Thank you so much for your time and attention.

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