



**Testimony of Laura Cordes**

**In support of Part CC**

***LD 2214 An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025***

**Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs**

**February 21, 2024**

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Sachs, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of both the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs Committees.

My name is Laura Cordes. I am the Executive Director for Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP) the statewide association of more than 90 agencies providing person centered educational, vocational, residential and community supports, as well as specialized services and care to a diverse population of Maine children and adults who have either intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, or brain injuries, so that they may live full and meaningful lives in the community.

We represent nearly half of the Special Purpose Preschools across our state. Special Purpose Preschools are a small but integral part of the education system for Maine's youngest children with disabilities. In the absence of universal Pre-K in Maine or a robust voluntary Pre-K network in school districts across the state, Special Purpose Preschools have stood up the critical specialized services for children with the highest needs, giving hope and changing the trajectory for hundreds of Maine's children and families each year. Unfortunately these same schools have run deficits for many years without receiving a tuition payment for the educational services provided to the majority of the students we serve who are referred to us by Child Development Services.

**We are in strong support of Part CC of the Governor's supplemental budget which funds the implementation of the Child Development Services daily (tuition) rate for Special Purpose Preschools.**

Last year, thanks to the work and leadership of members in both committees, a per-child, per day "intermediate payment" was established in the budget for Special Purpose Preschools for this school year in anticipation for the Department's development of a daily rate to be ready for implementation for the upcoming 2024- 2025 school year.

I'm happy to share that as of last month, intermediate payments are now flowing to Special Purpose Preschools, and the Department of Education is now working closely with these same preschools to develop the daily rate, in much the same way they work to develop a daily rate that the school districts provide to the K-12 Special Purpose Schools. I want to acknowledge and thank the staff of the Department for these efforts. In the coming weeks I look forward to working with them and members of the committee to understand their projections and methodology used to determine Part CC.

Creating the path for equitable funding for preschool services for children with the highest needs through both the intermediate payments and the forthcoming daily rate proposed in this budget is already changing the trajectory in the lives of hundreds of Maine's children with disabilities. It marks a profound turning point for families who have been on the long wait lists for these federally required early educational supports that the 3- 5 year old children need to thrive in the least restrictive environment.

The intermediate payments have kept many of our Special Purpose Preschools from closing altogether or from further reducing their census.

A recent MACSP survey of Special Purpose Preschools found that half of the providers responding report that they kept a classroom open that they otherwise had planned to close this year.

These same providers report that with the promise of a daily rate in place they have or are preparing to reopen shuttered classrooms and increase their census.

Collectively with the daily rate in place we estimate being able to increase the number of children we are supporting by nearly 40 percent by the end of next year.

There are three important recommendations related to these funds that I want to highlight.

First, is that language similar to that found in 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 Preschools* be added to the budget. This would ensure that if there are delays in the implementation of the daily rate for the 2024-2025 school year that funding in Part CC will be used to continue the intermediate payments until such time as the daily rate is implemented.

Second is clarifying, and if needed, finding a way to ensure that the daily tuition rate becomes part of the baseline budget that these schools can rely on moving forward. Uninterrupted, continuous funding that is paramount to our ability to help our youngest and most vulnerable children. We can't afford to take a step backwards. No school wants to question whether they should accept a referral from CDS without the assurance that there will be enough funding to support them through the school year.

Lastly, I know both committees will also be considering the Department's multi year plan, outlined in this budget, to transition the responsibility of providing Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for 3-5 year olds with disabilities from Child Development Services to school districts.

Understanding you have long days ahead of you, our members will be in the Education Committee for the hearing on this plan next week. Today however, we want to strongly encourage that the committee include language in any transition plan adopted, that clearly outlines the continued responsibility of CDS to pay the daily rate for children they refer to Special Purpose Preschools until such time that a child's school district becomes responsible for FAPE.

We look forward to the continued work with committee members, the Department, school districts and all stakeholders to implement meaningful changes for specialized education services. Maine's children with disabilities deserve no less.

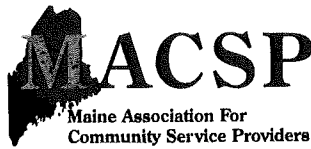
Thank you again for your time, consideration and support. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted,



Laura Cordes

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