

Dear Maine State Representatives,

Thank you for the opportunity for me to share my thoughts and concerns with LD 345. I have been independently contracted through Child Development Services to operate a special purpose preschool program in Scarborough for almost 20 years. Before moving to Maine in 2000, I was employed as a special education teacher in both Massachusetts and Colorado where public pre-k for children with and without special education needs was well established and universal in the public-schools for all children. I have seen how successful such programs can be and agree with Commissioner Makin that it is time for public schools to work towards universal pre-k in the public-school setting; however, I have many concerns and questions about the current proposal that were not answered or addressed in Commissioner Makin's presentation.

1. **Space:** For public schools that do not have space or foresee space in the future to accommodate preschool, will there be additional funding to support leasing additional space. There is currently a shortage of special purpose preschool programs like mine and that shortage is not going to disappear. Many programs have closed because funding is not sustainable. CDS has provided one increase in rates since I began my contract and that has not kept up with cost of living and increases in costs for expenses. The fact that we do not get paid when children are sick is a huge financial burden, especially during Covid. This model is not enticing for people to open new programs. Why would this proposal create more availability for children if public schools do not have the space and there already are not enough existing programs to offer placement?
2. **Funding:** Similar proposals have been created and voted down primarily because there was not a clear description of what funding would look like for public schools. What would funding look like with this program? As I already stated, the current funding model for special purpose preschool programs has not been sustainable.
3. **Contracted Therapists:** If public schools are required to serve all 3-5 year old's with IEPs in their district, will they be responsible for hiring additional therapeutic staff, such as: SLP, OT, PT, Special education teachers and Education Technicians to provide services for children who do not need a special purpose preschool program but receive services in their current preschool programs. These therapists will need to travel to provide services and large districts will most likely need to hire several to meet all the need. Public schools have not been fully staffed for several years. Will there be anything in the funding package to help public schools with hiring and retention.
4. **Maine Care:** Will it be mandated that public schools bill Maine Care when appropriate? Currently, many school districts do not bill Maine Care because of the liability with auditing. Maine Care is a medical model which does not fit well into public school IEP guidelines. If public schools are required to provide FAPE services to children, then why would Maine Care be allowed? Asking for insurance from families does not look like "Free Appropriate Education."

5. **CDS Case Management:** Will public schools have an option to choose their own case managers? Public Schools may not be comfortable having CDS be responsible for IEP writing and would most likely prefer their own staff to take this on.

6. **Student Bridge Program:** Commissioner Makin made a comment that with the extra money from The Student Bridge Program that programs are serving more children and hiring more staff. I personally meet with MACSP group members which include contracted CDS providers and have not heard that anyone has been able to hire more staff. This is due to uncertain finances because the program ends at the end of this school year and we will not be able to sustain wage increases. Programs cannot count on that money continuing in our budgets for next year.

7. **Funding for CDS:** Commissioner Makin made a comment that each year the state has been increasing funding to CDS but less children are being served. The increase in money has not gone to providers and programs who are providing the services. CDS has increased their staff but that does not provide more slots for children. The root of the problem is that many programs have closed because it is not financially sustainable with what CDS pays providers to continue. There needs to be incentive for more people to open programs. One of the most challenging financial aspects of operating a special purpose program is that we cannot bill when children are absent but still must pay staff to be present.

In summary, I do agree that early intervention services for 3–5-year old’s needs to move into the public school system but there needs to be a clear plan for funding. This proposal does not target the challenge that there are not enough special purpose preschool programs for young children to attend in Maine. This proposal does not solve the challenges of placement but simply shifts the existing challenge from CDS to the public school without addressing the root problem, increased funding for providers.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to submit my questions and concerns.

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