

Committee Members,

As the Director of Special Education for the Augusta Schools, I am writing to offer my testimony in support of LD 345, which aims to address the transition of the responsibility for Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) from Child Development Services (CDS) to public schools.

Having previously worked at CDS from 2000 to 2009 as both a Service Coordinator and a Developmental Therapist, I possess a deep understanding of the CDS system and the implications of public schools assuming FAPE responsibilities. I hold a Master's degree in Early Intervention from the University of Maine at Orono and I am certified 282 Birth to Grade 12, further enhancing my expertise in this domain.

Through preliminary meetings with agencies in my catchment area, it has become evident that collaborative efforts are essential to effectively serve children aged 3-5 years. Therefore, I stress the importance of flexible language within the bill to accommodate the diverse needs of different school administrative units (SAUs) in assuming child find and FAPE responsibilities. Restrictive language may inadvertently create barriers and hinder districts from effectively assuming these responsibilities.

Direct billing of Mainecare and private insurance must be facilitated for districts to ensure sustainable funding for services. This provision is critical given the substantial undertaking of assuming FAPE responsibilities, including the associated audit risks. Adequate funding is paramount to address existing space constraints and transportation limitations within our school buildings.

My support for this legislation is underpinned by the alarming trend of students entering kindergarten ill-equipped to meet its demands. Over the past five years, there has been a significant increase in the number of students requiring services upon kindergarten

entry. This stark contrast to previous years, when CDS provided relatively early intervention services, underscores the necessity of timely and comprehensive interventions to address communication and self-care deficits among students.

Funding allocated for this mandate should flow directly to schools to facilitate efficient budgeting and planning without the need for intermediary regional hubs. Moreover, alignment of legal language and requirements with school-based services, as well as federal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), is imperative to ensure coherence and effectiveness in service provision.

In conclusion, I urge your support for LD 345 to empower public schools in fulfilling their FAPE responsibilities and ensuring equitable access to early intervention services for all children. Thank you for considering my testimony.

Sincerely,

Shelby Thibodeau

Director of Special Education

Augusta Schools