



**maineaeYC**

Maine Association for the  
Education of Young Children

Testimony of Heather Marden

On behalf of the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children

Neither for Nor Against

**LD 345: An Act Regarding Educational Policies and Programs**

2/27/2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Heather Marden, Co-Executive Director of the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children (MaineAEYC).

*MaineAEYC promotes high-quality early learning for each and every child, birth through age 8, by connecting practice, policy, and research. We advance a diverse, dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children.*

As an early childhood education teacher of 20 years, I worked in special education k-7<sup>th</sup> grade and in private child care programs. I was blessed over those 20 years to learn from and work with children with individualized education plans in both settings. I want to share how least restrictive environment shaped the learning and growing of students in my care when I was teaching in a 4 year old classroom.

I want to share about Charlie, a fun, enthusiastic 4 year old who came into my classroom going through the process of an autism diagnosis with CDS. Charlie's process began when he was 3 years old. His parents were amazing advocates for him and while this process is always difficult for families, Charlie's parents had already begun living with the notion that Charlie was autistic.

Charlie was in my child care program for around four months by the time the official diagnosis came through and an individualized education plan came to be discussed. He had made a best friend who was a typically developing peer. They would both smile and run to each other, yelling each other's names when they arrived at school. This made other peers want to join in and also greet Charlie in the morning because his love of this friend was infectious.

Charlie also came to trust me and my assistant teacher. When problem solving became just too much of a task or a new skill was frustrating, he accepted our help and our care, even if it was to just separate from the problem for a bit and return to it better collected. He made us laugh every day, he was funny.

He was thriving in his relationships, however, needed extra attention for certain skills. As he received his diagnosis, his case manager whom I had grown a trusting relationship with through work with other children, caught me before his IEP and let me know her hands were tied and I was not going to like the proposal on his IEP but it's all they could offer at that time. The

proposal was that Charlie would leave our program to have his services at another location. That was it. Leave the classroom he loved and belonged in or receive no services.

To make that choice as a parent was gutwrenching for his family. It was gutwrenching for all of us who would lose Charlie in our lives. Sadly, Charlie did not have a good experience in his new location. He was sad, he missed his peers and teachers, and he began to display behaviours that were not typical for him.

So, I tell this story to make you all aware that special education services aren't just about oversight, IEPs, and case management. They are innately about belonging and providing each child with their promised access to their least restrictive environment. I want to be hopeful about this proposed transition. I know too many children are going without services currently. However, I ask you in this legislation to find ways to guarantee that a child's least restrictive environment is always honored and that the system does not constantly uproot children because it's what works best for the adults. We need to meet children where they belong and with what they deserve.