



Testimony of Laura Cordes
Neither for nor Against
LD 345 An Act Regarding Educational Policies and Programs
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
February 27, 2024

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on LD 345 *An Act Regarding Educational Policies and Programs*.

My name is Laura Cordes. I am the Executive Director of the Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP). MACSP is the statewide association of more than 90 individual, mission driven agencies providing person centered and individualized educational, vocational, residential and community supports, as well as specialized services and care to several thousand of Maine's 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.

LD 345 serves as the vehicle for the committee's consideration of the Department of Education's multi year plan which includes the transition the responsibility of Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for 3-5 year olds from Child Development Services (CDS) to school districts.

This initiative, which has also been featured by the Governor in the Supplemental Budget, has the potential to redesign and build the system and network needed to ensure that Maine's youngest children have access to the early intervention and time sensitive life changing supports when needed and in compliance with Federal law.

We support the adoption of a plan to successfully transition CDS responsibility of FAPE to school districts.

MACSP members have been active participants in the PCG study, and in the subsequent advisory groups that followed in the 130th session which examined and made recommendations to support a successful transition of CDS responsibility for 3-5 year old supports and education to the school districts.

Our recommendations have included the school district assessments, readiness planning, secured funding as well as ongoing and meaningful stakeholder engagement.

We see great promise in the proposed CDS regional hub model and are encouraged by the number of school districts that are already, or are interested in, partnering with the Department.

You recently received draft legislation from several organizations including Maine Developmental Disabilities Council and Maine Parent Federation, amending the language considered for LD 345 today. We are aligned with the recommendations therein to delineate and build upon the CDS Regional Hubs as "Support Hubs" and to adopt and utilize readiness assessments and state aligned checklists "that appraise the readiness of an SAU and community early childhood education settings measuring key features of quality, utilizing an inclusive practice lens."

We need a baseline. Information from assessments will help us understand the specific needs for each district and for the state in aggregate and help mark the progress that the state is making year over year.

We also need year over year understanding of how many children have unmet service needs and how many children remain on CDS waitlists, so we can better track progress and make adjustments in any plan adopted.

Additionally, as this is a multi year plan that involves the ongoing collaboration of multiple stakeholders, we strongly encourage the committee to create a CDS Transition Advisory Committee to advise the Legislature, Governor and Department on the development and implementation of the plan, and to further foster and support the collaboration and coordination that is needed between community partners, advocates, families, school districts and the Department for a system redesign to be successful.

Special Purpose Preschools

I want to thank Commissioner Makin for reaching out to MACSP ahead of the Department's presentation to the committee this session to share the proposed framework of this plan. We appreciate her ongoing acknowledgment of the important role that Special Purpose Preschools have in our current and future system.

In the absence of universal Pre-K or robust preschool presence throughout our state we have been providing therapeutic medically necessary and specialized education for children with the most complex and highest needs in special purpose preschools for nearly two decades. More districts with more preschools for our youngest children means greater access to services in the most inclusive classroom. We already partner with school districts across the state to support children with disabilities with the most complex needs in our K-12 Special Purpose Schools and we look forward to expanding those partnerships to support children who may need our specialized preschool settings.

It is of great importance that uninterrupted, continued payment for Special Purpose Preschools that align with our Special Purpose K-12 counterparts must be made a priority and clearly outlined in the plan.

We encourage the committee to explicitly outline that the Department of Education remain responsible for the payment of the forthcoming Daily Rate for any child they refer to a Special Purpose Preschool, who is approved under MaineCare, until such time that a child's school district becomes responsible for FAPE.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We welcome your questions and would be happy to provide additional information.