



Testimony of Laura Cordes

LD 210 An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027

Joint Standing Committees on Appropriation and Financial Affairs & Education and Cultural Affairs

February 7, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Rotondo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Gattine, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on LD 210, the Biennial Budget. My name is Laura Cordes, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP). We represent nearly 100 mission-driven agencies that provide essential educational, vocational, residential, and community-based supports to thousands of Maine children and adults with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, and brain injuries. Our collective goal is to ensure that every individual we serve has the opportunity to live a full, meaningful life in their community.

Our members employ approximately 9,000 dedicated direct service professionals and provide services to more than 5,000 adults and 2,000 children statewide. Today, I am here on behalf of those providers who deliver critical, federally required therapeutic and educational supports to preschool-aged children with the most complex behavioral and developmental disabilities in Special Purpose Preschools.

Their teams do life-changing work for 3- to 5-year-old children in Special Purpose Preschools (SPPS). They know—and research confirms—that early intervention makes all the difference in a child’s future. That is why we are here today with an urgent request: restore funding for the daily tuition rate for Special Purpose Preschools in the biennial budget.

Two years ago, with your leadership and the unanimous bipartisan support of the Appropriations and Education committees, the Legislature, in collaboration with the Department, families, and providers, initiated a plan to address a long-standing funding inequity for Special Purpose Preschools.

The last biennial budget included funding for an intermediate payment for Special Purpose Preschools for the 2023-2024 school year. It also directed the Department to work with providers to develop a daily tuition rate for the children who CDS referred to Special Purpose Preschools. (MRS Title 20-A, section 7302, subsection 2, paragraph G.)

This was followed by funding in last year’s budget for the daily tuition rate which is now in place for the current 2024-2025 school year.

As you may know, Child Development Services (CDS) contracts with Special Purpose Preschools to support the children whom they refer. They also approve each child's IEP (Individualized Education Plan). However, until last year, if the referred child was also approved for therapeutic and necessary supports under MaineCare, CDS did not offer a daily rate, tuition payment, or financial support to the school for the educational costs or services provided.

Over time, this lack of payment from CDS for the cost of the educational instruction and program for children created an inequity between children based on age, and specialized preschools began to decrease their census and close. MaineCare dollars cannot be used to pay for educational costs or instruction. In comparison, K-12 Special Purpose Schools that support children in school districts receive tuition payments from the sending school for the education costs regardless of whether the child is approved under MaineCare.

By late November, after some unexpected delays, providers received their first tuition payments—retroactive to July 1, 2024. And it is working. The daily tuition rate is delivering exactly what we all intended:

- More families are seeing their children come off waitlists.
- Children are receiving the specialized services they need to meet developmental milestones and increase their likelihood of being integrated into public classrooms with their peers.
- Schools and classrooms that were once at risk of closing have stayed open.
- Shuttered classrooms have reopened.
- Providers have been able to hire more staff, allowing them to serve more children.

A MACSP survey conducted this week of 10 organizations operating 18 Special Purpose Preschool programs found that just six months into this school year, 60% of providers reported a 20% increase in the number of children served.

But despite this progress, the need still far outweighs capacity. Right now, the number of children on waitlists still exceeds those being served by more than 50%.

We greatly appreciate the Department of Education's work over the course of this last year to develop each school's daily rate and for the Legislature's commitment to families to ensure children receive the education they need. That is why we were shocked to learn that funding for these payments for federally required educational services was no longer included in the budget.

This is not just a setback. If funding is not restored:

- Schools will close.
- More children will be left without access to early intervention and educational services.
- Families who have waited patiently—who have finally seen progress—will be left with nowhere to turn.

We recognize the difficult budget decisions before you. We do not take lightly the challenges of balancing competing needs. But this is not an area where we can afford to go backward.

The state is required to provide free appropriate public education (FAPE) to children with disabilities. The state has a clear, multi-year plan to transition the responsibility for the education of 3-5-year-olds with special needs from CDS to local school districts. When that transition is complete, SAUs will pay tuition for each child they support through a Special Purpose Preschool, just as they do now for children in their district supported in a K-12

Special Purpose School. But that day is not here yet. Until then, Special Purpose Preschool programs cannot survive without tuition payments.

Please restore funding for the daily tuition rate for Special Purpose Preschools in the biennial budget.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions or provide additional information.

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