

**DISABILITY
RIGHTS
MAINE** 

February 11, 2025

Hand Delivered

Senator Peggy Rotundo, Chair
Representative Drew Gattine, Chair
Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
c/o Office of Fiscal and Program Review
5 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Senator Henry Ingwersen, Chair
Representative Michele Meyer, Chair
Committee on Health and Human Services
c/o Legislative Information
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

***Re: LD 210, Biennial Budget (Part A, Page 182) - Funding to Disability Rights
Maine for special education advocacy***

Dear Senators Rotundo and Ingwersen, Representatives Gattine and Meyer, and Members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and the Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Atlee Reilly and I am a Managing Attorney at Disability Rights Maine, Maine's protection and advocacy agency for individuals with disabilities. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today in support of the proposal in the biennial budget to continue financial support for special education advocacy at Disability Rights Maine ("DRM"). The proposed Biennial Budget (Part A, Page 182), calls for an annual appropriation of \$146,045 for FY 2025-26 and FY 2026-27. This is a continuation of current funding levels.

160 Capitol Street, Suite 4, Augusta, ME 04330

207.626.2774 • 1.800.452.1948 • Fax: 207.621.1419 • drme.org

Disability Rights Maine is a private non-profit organization, governed by a volunteer board of directors, and designated by the Governor of Maine to serve as Maine's independent protection and advocacy agency for people with disabilities. DRM works to advance justice and equality by enforcing rights and expanding opportunities for people with disabilities in Maine. We have close to fifty staff, twelve of whom are attorneys, who work under twenty-plus funding sources across federal and state programs to ensure that Mainers with disabilities: are protected from abuse; are able to control the decisions that affect their lives; receive the services and supports necessary to live independently; have the opportunity to work and contribute to society; and have equal access to the same opportunities afforded other Mainers.

DRM has two attorneys who work state-wide to provide advocacy on behalf of children with disabilities, including educational advocacy. Because there are no federal funds earmarked for educational advocacy, the State of Maine has supplemented our federal funding through this general fund appropriation in the DHHS budget since 2007. This funding allows DRM to provide no cost advocacy services to students with disabilities and their families.

The attorneys supported by this funding handled 159 individual cases in FY 2023 and 146 individual cases in FY 2024 while also providing technical assistance to dozens more families. This individual representation involved a wide range of activities - from assisting parents and students with self-advocacy skills, to advocacy in school meetings, to filing administrative due process proceedings and complaints with the Maine Department of Education.

These services were delivered state-wide, with cases handled in each of Maine's sixteen counties. In addition to individual representation, DRM conducts training and outreach activities, develops educational materials, and works with diverse partners to seek systemic solutions to common problems. Our current priorities for educational advocacy include:

- 1) Ensuring Access: DRM works to keep Maine children with disabilities in school, all day, every day, by providing advocacy services to address school exclusions in all forms. And we continue to advocate for access to appropriate early intervention services.
- 2) Protection from Abuse/Neglect: DRM works to ensure that schools use available tools to prevent behavioral escalations and responds when schools instead resort to the routinized use of restraint and seclusion. DRM also works to address disability related bullying and harassment in schools.
- 3) Least Restrictive Environment: DRM helps students and their families advocate for an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, which is presumed to be the same school and classroom attended by their friends and neighbors.
- 4) Transition to Employment and Independent Living: DRM provides advocacy services to help students with disabilities and their families access legally required transition planning and services to support movement to postsecondary education and training, employment, and independent living.

LD 210, Biennial Budget (Part A, Page 182)

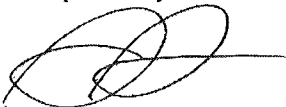
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DRM continues to receive many more requests for assistance from families than our educational advocacy practice can provide. And without this state funding, DRM would be unable to continue providing advocacy and support to ensure that children with disabilities are provided equal access to educational opportunities.

We are available as a resource if you have questions about the educational rights of children with disabilities and/or about the potential impacts of proposals that may come before you on the lives of Maine children with disabilities and their families. I may be reached at areilly@drme.org or 207.626.2774 x220. Please feel free to reach out at any time with any questions or concerns.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Atlee Reilly', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Atlee Reilly
Managing Attorney
Disability Rights Maine