

3/3/2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Audrey Bartholomew, and I live in Portland. I have worked in the field of disabilities for many years, first as a special education teacher and now as an Associate Professor of Special Education. I also own my own consulting company, working with schools to improve special education services. However, my testimony today is reflective of my own personal beliefs and experiences, not those of my employer. I am here to urge you to support *LD 46, An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder*.

As a college professor, this time of year is always an exciting one for me to be a part of. High school students are visiting campus, attending open houses, and making plans for their futures. Colleges all over Maine are buzzing with visitors eager to see where they might spend the next few years of their lives. For so many young people, this is a time filled with hope, opportunity, and possibility.

But for many students with intellectual disabilities and autism, this time of year looks very different. Instead of visiting campuses or making choices about their future, they are often facing the reality that higher education is not an option for them. Not because they aren't capable of learning and growing in a college environment, but because the programs and supports they need simply do not exist in Maine.

Across the country, over 300 inclusive higher education programs provide students with intellectual disabilities access to college courses, campus life, and the skills needed to gain employment and live more independently. The impact of these programs is undeniable—the employment rate for young adults with intellectual disabilities who do not attend such programs is only 16-17%, but for those who complete inclusive postsecondary programs, it jumps to nearly 50%. These programs don't just benefit the students—they benefit our economy by helping fill jobs and reducing long-term reliance on public support.

We know that Maine has the people willing to do the hard work to make these programs a reality. Over the past year and a half, Maine IPSE (Inclusive Postsecondary Education) has been bringing together stakeholders from across the state—including educators, disability organizations, families, and state

agencies—to think creatively how we can support and grow these programs in Maine. We are also part of a regional network of northeastern states, supported by Think College, a national leader in inclusive higher education. The expertise, the energy, and the commitment are already here—what’s missing is the initial investment to get these programs off the ground.

This bill provides that critical first step. A modest amount of funding can serve as a catalyst for a new movement in Maine, allowing colleges and universities to develop inclusive higher education programs and, most importantly, provide scholarships to help students attend. By aligning these programs with federal guidelines for comprehensive transition programs, students may also become eligible for additional federal financial aid in the future, further expanding access without additional state burden.

I recognize that the state budget is tight, and I understand the difficult financial decisions that must be made. However, this bill is not just an expense—it is an investment in our young people, in our workforce, and in Maine’s future. When students with intellectual disabilities are given access to higher education, they gain the skills needed to join the workforce, contribute to their communities, and live more independently.

Last year, this committee unanimously voted in favor of this bill, recognizing its importance. I urge you to do so again. No student in Maine should be told that college is not for them simply because of their disability. It’s time to take the next step and invest in a future where postsecondary education is an option for all students.

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

Audrey Bartholomew, PhD
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