



March 3rd, 2025

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Re: 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

Chair Rafferty, Chair Murphy, and Distinguished Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

My name is Carrie Woodcock and I am the Executive Director for Maine Parent Federation (MPF) and the parent of two children with different abilities. MPF is Maine's federally funded Parent Training and Information Center and Family-to-Family Health Information Center. We provide training and individual assistance to families of children with different abilities (especially to underserved populations) to increase access to all systems of care and increase positive outcomes.

I am testifying today in support of 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.

You have heard and will continue to hear about all the positive impacts and statistics a post-secondary educational experience can have for an Individual with a Developmental Disability and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder. I will speak to you today from my heart as a parent and share two short stories with you.

First, my oldest son is currently enjoying his college experience as a sophomore at St. Lawrence University. It was Noah's college exploration process that inspired his sister Sami's aspirations to go to college. Noah has Dyslexia and Anxiety which present their own unique challenges to learning. Despite these challenges Noah had the opportunity to explore institutions of higher education that would meet his needs. Ultimately, Noah was accepted into 7 different institutions including his first choice where he has experienced the most academic success in his educational career. This bill aims to provide in our state that same opportunity that Noah had for individuals like Sami. Currently, in our state we have only 1 program.

Second last year when this very same bill was introduced and received unanimous support from this Committee a number of you heard from an individual named Mia LaPlante. For those of you who were not on the Committee, Mia is a graduate student at the University of New England studying social work and last year was a member of the UNE hockey team participating in her final year of sports eligibility. As with all the members of the hockey team Mia became and remains a friend to my daughter Sami.

During her testimony Mia spoke about her ability to live out her dream and be able to choose a college experience that best met her needs and career choices. She expressed her desire for Sami and individuals like Sami to be able to have that same opportunity.

Even though Mia is no longer a member of the hockey team Sami and I still keep in touch with her. Despite being offered a position with the child welfare offices in Massachusetts we learned that Mia instead chose to work in a school with students with Intellectual Disabilities. She spoke to us about her work with such joy and excitement. I also had the opportunity to connect with Mia's mom. She shared with me about Mia's work this year, spoke about how excited Mia was for an upcoming skiing field trip with the students and then thanked me for sharing Sami with Mia. She felt as though her experience with Sami was a big part of Mia's decision to work with individuals like Sami. In speaking with both Mia and with Mia's mom I could feel the sense of pride and joy in the work Mia was doing.

I am sharing this story with all of you because it is first hand proof that REAL inclusion, like the programming this bill is looking to create in our state, not only positively changes the lives of those with different abilities but also the lives of those they create relationships with. Sami is very lucky to be able to have people like Mia in her life. As her parent it is so nice to hear from people who feel the same way about Sami.

Please support this bill so we can open many more opportunities in our state for these types of interactions within our institutions of higher education and make a difference on the increased capacity for workforce opportunities in the disability community.

Respectfully,
Carrie Woodcock