

Jodie Hall  
North Yarmouth

Senator Rafferty  
Representative Brennan  
Members of the Educational and Cultural Affairs Committee

RE: LD 552 An Act To Strengthen the Individualized Education Program Process

My name is Jodie Hall, and I am the parent of a child with a disability who accesses special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP). I am providing testimony in support of LD 552, as I believe its provisions will enhance the educational experience for students who receive special education.

I have been participating in my son's IEP team meetings for thirteen years, as he is now a high school student. While I am aware that I am technically an equal member of the IEP team, the processes currently in place to allow changes to an IEP do not support the parent role. Presently, if a parent does not agree with proposed changes to the IEP, but the majority of the IEP team members are in agreement, the onus of initiating dispute resolution processes falls squarely on the parent's shoulders. This is an unfair expectation and one that most certainly creates greater disparities in the IEP process. Too many times, parents do not feel heard or respected in IEP meetings as school personnel often present as one team, leaving parents to feel as if they are on an opposing team. This does not create an environment which encourages parents to raise objections to proposed changes, and it is discouraging and overwhelming.

As parents, we must give our consent in almost all areas of our children's lives. We provide consent for medical providers to treat our children. We provide consent for our children to participate in athletic events. We even provide consent for our kids' photos to be taken. However, in Maine, we do not require parental consent to make changes to our children's IEPs. This communicates that parents do not know what their children need, and it unjustly places that decision-making power into the hands of educators who only know one dimension of that student – rather than the child as a whole.

Another aspect to reflect upon is the idea that students who are above the age of majority (18) should have protections in place to allow their perspectives to be heard and honored. Presently the IEP process allows for changes to be made to that student's plan without their consent. This devalues the student's experience and once again removes the decision-making power from their hands. In 2019, Maine's probate code was updated in an attempt to encourage Supported Decision Making and less restrictive alternatives to guardianship. These legal changes support the idea that an individual's goals should be heard and respected. This is in direct opposition to the current process for making changes to that same individual's IEP.

It is also extremely important that Educational Technicians are invited to participate in IEP team meetings, as they work directly with students to carry out IEP goals. They are well equipped to speak to the daily needs of students, and their input should be heard and valued. Their perspectives could help to shape the students' objectives to help meet their goals.

Thank you for considering my testimony as you thoughtfully review this bill.

Sincerely,  
Jodie Hall  
North Yarmouth, Maine