



# Coastal Kids Preschool

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*Providing an inclusive, developmentally appropriate education for preschool children of all incomes and abilities*

## **Testimony Regarding**

**L.D. 135 An Act To Address Issues in Funding Prekindergarten Programs**

**L.D. 255 An Act To Ensure Student Success, and**

**L.D. 386 An Act To Improve Operations at the Department of Education**

## **Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs**

**Tuesday, May 18, 2021**

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to offer consolidated testimony in regard to the bills being drafted to adopt recommendations from the PCG [Independent Review of the State's Early Childhood Special Education Services](#) Report: L.D. 135 An Act To Address Issues in Funding Prekindergarten Programs, L.D. 255 An Act To Ensure Student Success, and L.D. 386 An Act To Improve Operations at the Department of Education.

My name is Lisa Conway and I am Executive Director of Coastal Kids Preschool in Damariscotta.

Coastal Kids provides a high quality, developmentally appropriate preschool program for children of all incomes and abilities. Our inclusive program serves over 100 children and their families per year, and one third of our licensed slots are allocated for children with diagnosed disabilities. We are the largest provider of preschool special education services in the midcoast region.

Coastal Kids has been a contracted provider of CDS services for over 25 years, providing specially designed instruction within our inclusive program. Throughout this time, we have seen good efforts by our regional CDS to provide timely services, to provide PT, OT, and speech therapists, and to facilitate 1:1 support services for our students. Unfortunately, though, CDS has often been hampered by low budgets, transportation issues for children from more remote towns, and lack of available therapists. There is also a significant lack of contracted programs in our region, so many students end up underserved or on our waitlist.

I strongly support any legislation that will allow my school, and others like it, to better serve all of our youngest learners – especially those who have diagnosed special needs. This legislation may well be the opportunity we are hoping for if it will establish a new system for delivering early intervention services that will better meet the needs of our students. For these three bills to be successful, though, I urge you to also consider the following points:

- School district readiness and capacity – time is needed to assess and build district capacity for supporting young learners with special needs; districts will need to have qualified administrators, early childhood specialists, therapists (OT, PT, and speech) trained in early childhood, and special educators with B-5 282s (not just giving temporary certificates to K-8 special education staff); the role and value of special purpose programs should also be addressed
- Funding – simply transferring funds from CDS to SAUs won't fix everything, and it will be critical to determine the costs and additional funding needed for a truly successful transition

- Staffing – will DOE therapists have ECE backgrounds? And will private programs who serve toddlers and younger pre-K students be supported with expedited pathways to getting staff certified as B-5 282 providers? (The Praxis is not a good fit, and the current requirement holds back qualified ECE special education teachers who have been in the field for many years.)
- Transition leadership – it is critical that stakeholders be involved to avoid further destabilization of the system and to negate any barriers to accessing vital support; a legislative, non-departmental Advisory Committee should develop the timeline and plan for transition, similar to the committee previously created to facilitate the PCG report, and this Advisory Committee should remain in place to provide monitoring, troubleshooting, and leadership through the implementation process
- Implementation – for towns that don't already have public pre-K, will the DOE contract with private programs to continue our work? Or will local public schools be supported in starting their public pre-K programs in order to best serve all children in an LRE setting? In our town, the public school does not currently have infrastructure or staff to provide such programming for pre-K, let alone for toddlers and younger pre-K students

So, while I support state-level, systemic changes that will better provide access to early childhood education and the quality of early childhood programming, I believe that robust measures are still needed to ensure that the changes recommended in these bills are positive ones for ALL students – especially those with special needs who currently attend inclusive or special purpose preschools, and those who will do so in the future. School district readiness and capacity, funding, staffing, transition leadership, and clear implementation strategies are critical to the success of these bills.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



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