



Testimony Neither for nor Against
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. My name is Laura Cordes and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP), the statewide association of more than 70 organizations providing services and support for thousands of children, adolescents, and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout our state so that they can live full lives in the community.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on 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*.

As these bills do not have language yet, our standing is neither for nor against these bills, and our consolidated comments are in responses to the draft language which was discussed in the Committee and shared by the clerk on Thursday, May 13.

Today you'll hear from several MACSP members who represent organizations with Special Purpose Preschools throughout our state. They are all experts in the field of specialized services for preschool aged children with disabilities, which are considered as part of the reform being proposed.

Supporting our children with both the medically necessary and educational supports to be successful in the least restrictive educational environment is the focus of our Special Purpose Preschools. Contrary to some remarks made by Department officials in front of the committee this session, these providers are not at the heart of the current challenges facing the state. Over the course of the last decade throughout the slow dismantling of CDS, Special Purpose Preschools have continued to center the needs of Maine's most vulnerable children. Providers neither pick nor choose children they support, but rather accept children that are referred to them. Even with inadequate funding, Special Purpose Preschools maintain and pride themselves on their high standards and licensing, as well as the development and training they provide for their staff. In fact their highly trained and specialized staff are often recruited and leave to take higher paying positions with school districts and Specialized K-12 programs. Both the state, SAUs and certainly hundreds upon hundreds of families have and continue to count on our Special Purpose Preschools to work effectively with young children during

their early critical years to successfully transition into the public school system.

Looking forward, MACSP believes that robust measures must be taken to consider the vital role of Special Purpose Preschools in the fabric of any plan adopted to transition the provision of early childhood special education services for children with disabilities from 4 years of age to under 6 years of age from Child Development Services to School Administrative Units (SAUs).

We recommend that the State adopt legislation that allows ample time for stakeholder engagement to:

- specifically address the role and value of Special Purpose Preschools in a new system
- assess each school district's readiness and capacity to ensure support for children with intensive needs in the least restrictive setting
- determine the true costs and funding needed for a successful transition

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MACSP supports the development of an Advisory Committee to develop the implementation timeline and plan for transition by February 2022. We believe that this should be a Legislative, not a Department Advisory Committee, and similar to the advisory group that this Committee previously created to facilitate the PCG report. Legislators were key to recognizing the challenges facing the Special Education System, and we believe your continued leadership and participation in the new Advisory Committee is needed through the development and implementation of the transition plan to ensure its success. We further recommend that this Advisory Group remain in place beyond the delivery of the implementation plan proposed for February 2022, so that it can monitor and troubleshoot throughout the progress of the implementation plan after its adoption.

The draft language regarding creation of the Advisory Committee specifically directs the committee to report back on several items including the funding needed to support early childhood special education services for Maine's children with disabilities. Establishing the true costs and increased funding needed for the State, SAUs as well as the Special Purpose Preschools that will be working with the State and SAUs as they build their capacity or as part of their plan to support children is key to ensuring equitable support throughout the system. Costs for Special Purpose Preschools were underrepresented in the PCG report which compared Special Purpose Preschools to typical preschools not K-12 Special Purpose Private Schools, so the true costs still need to be considered. For Special Purpose Preschools who do not receive tuition reimbursement as Special Purpose K-12 Private Schools do, this is an important step.

SAU SCHOOL READINESS AND CAPACITY ASSESSMENT

MACSP recommends adding language that would either within or outside the Advisory Committee, provide for a SAU readiness and capacity assessment. SAUs are varied in their capacity to develop and support early childhood programs for children 4-6 with disabilities. Understanding the full range of needs and costs district by district across the state will be essential to consider when developing the implementation plan.

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CENTRAL BILLING SYSTEM

The draft bill language also provides for the development of a central billing system. MACSP supports the development of this system for SAUs only. Special Purpose Preschool should maintain their own billing system.

This transition will be significant. It is critical that stakeholders be involved every step of the way so as to avoid further destabilization of the system, and to negate any barriers to accessing the vital support, skill development and educational opportunity needed for preschool children with developmental disabilities and autism as a new system is developed.

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact me if you have questions or would like additional information.

Respectfully submitted,

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