

Dayna Klein
Yarmouth

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Dear Honorable Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

I am writing on behalf of my family in support of your invaluable opportunity to revamp Child Development Services so that services to children, 0-5 years old, can be best served through their delivery of Early Intervention Services.

My 14 year old son -Charley- is a successful alumni of Children's Odyssey in Portland, Maine. When my son was 16 months old, he was a very unhappy little boy who had not yet developed basic play and verbal expression skills. My sweet non-verbal little boy was helped tremendously by CDS York County's inhome community services and then at 3 years old, he started his time as a student in a 50/50 special needs/ neurotypical classroom at Children's Odyssey.

While I look back now with the nostalgia that comes with parenting a young teenager, the invitation to share our experiences with you brings back the difficult memories of the herculean efforts it took to get my son the services he so badly needed as a preschooler.

My son initially languished on waiting lists and though I dotted all of our i's and crossed all our t's- it took weekly calls to the administrators at Child Development Services over 2 months to get my son the help that he not only needed, but was entitled to as a youngster in Maine.

When it came time for him to graduate to a preschool, the then administrator of Cumberland County's CDS did everything she could to dispute my son's medical diagnosis and referrals to CDS from the specialists at Maine Behavioral Health. When I finally threatened litigation, we finally got an IFSP meeting where she did all she could to pigeonhole my son into attending the then state funded Cumberland County's Reach Preschool Program- a filthy building run by lax administrators and paraprofessionals- no place for my precious son who needed professional help- not a state run institution that cost the state little to no money to operate to support my disabled son.

My one and only visit there was awful. I saw teachers dressed in tattered clothing physically forcing children to participate in a sliding activity- despite the protests of these 4 year olds. I saw dirty rubber gloves strewn all over the floor in the hallways and classrooms along with other garbage everywhere. I was ignored while the administrator giving me the tour took time out of our time to reprimand other staff people.

Sadly, even after I shared this experience, I was forced to again play the litigation card in order for her to honor our right to school choice and she finally okayed my son's right to attend CDS funded Children's Odyssey- a wonderful place that takes a whole child approach to working with young children.

Within weeks of starting at Children's Odyssey, my son began to speak and his vocabulary exploded. My melancholy little boy was humming along to music and dancing for the first time in his young life- the experience was life changing and I can honestly say, 9 years later, that when I see the alumni of the CDS's Reach school and compare them to my son, the Reach alum are still working on mastering the basic skills that are supposed to be taught as part of an early intervention program.

This is your chance to make a difference for children and families in Maine.

School choice is and should continue to be a basic right of all parents in the CDS system- parents and specialists, not bean counters, need to be empowered unconditionally to choose the school that best meets their children's needs.

Programs, like the ones the state has established recently by CDS in Saco, Maine to clear the crowded waiting lists that the state had filled with self identified families are inappropriate and in violation of the Federal Government's statute that all children have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment and parents, as state tax paying citizens, have the right to school choice based on their children's needs not cost saving institutions with one size fits all programming.

The state's Child Find Program across the board- from preschoolers to public school students- is a farce and parents and caregivers who do not have the education and skill to advocate for their children leave kids unserved and failing in our public schools.

It's time- and overdue- for our state legislators to take the initiative to improve CDS now. Quality Early Intervention programs have been proven time and again to save the state's money in the long run because it's less expensive to front load services when children are young vs. staffing schools to meet the extraordinary needs of teens that are failing in our public schools.

It's time to stop stranding our youngest citizens in one-size fits all state run institutions vs. following the guidance of medical professionals and parents who know best what for their children, to have a say in their child's early education as parents who have neurotypical children do, and for us to finally take Child Find seriously so that "no child is left behind" to save the state money now, only to have to pay more later to educate older children with special needs.

I hope to hear and celebrate your thoughtful decisions re: Child Development Services soon.

Very sincerely yours,
Dayna Klein, LMSW aka Charley's mom