

Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Testimony on Early Intervention Services System – May 18, 2021

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My name is Peter Lindsay. I serve on the Board of the Maine Children's Alliance and have worked on early care and education issues for many years in the Mid Coast region and statewide. I am now retired and live in lovely North Yarmouth.

I strongly support the effort to re-design the early intervention system across Maine. We need to start early to identify any early delays and then to provide our very youngest children with a strong foundation for future learning and living.

Maine Children's Alliance recently released its 2021 Maine KIDS COUNT Data Book. I was surprised and disappointed to find out that in 2019, only 77 Maine children under age one—less than one percent—were identified and connected to services to address developmental delays. What's worse, Maine was tied for last place among all 50 states.

Maine does not do much better when looking at services during the first three years of children's lives. Maine's Child Development Services (CDS) in its latest numbers served less than 3 percent of children birth to age 3. Maine still ranks extremely low – coming in 41st across the country. We know that there are many children who are not being identified early or receiving services. National research suggests that between 13 and 20 percent of children under age 3 could benefit from early intervention efforts.

Maine needs to design a system that works across the state in both rural and more urban regions. We need to invest in both the system and in our workforce so there are enough therapists and skilled professionals to make the early identifications and to then provide the best therapies to address any developmental delays.

Maine needs a robust system because when challenges are identified and addressed early on, children have a much better chance of being prepared for school and life. And the older a child is, the more difficult it is to mitigate challenges—and the more expensive. Currently, 162,777 Maine students in grades 1-12 receive special education services. Our state has the highest rate in the nation. Reducing these numbers is good for families, children, schools ... and the bottom line.

During this pandemic year, I, like many others, did more gardening than ever before. I can tell you that throwing seeds on the ground will not result in a garden. A gardener knows he or she must prepare the soil, perhaps test the soil through assistance from Maine's Cooperative Extension, and then feed the soil. A garden needs a good foundation. Our children deserve a strong foundation in the earliest years as well.

You have the opportunity to significantly improve the CDS system across Maine, and yes, it will take an investment in these early identification services and early intervention practices. This bill will help plan for a strong foundation for children. And a strong foundation for children leads to a stronger state and helps meet our future needs for a healthy and vibrant workforce across Maine.