

Dear Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Amelia Bernard and I live in Windham. I am writing today to advocate for the future of field of Early Childhood Special Education in Maine. Time and time again studies and real-world examples have reiterated the importance of early intervention services, both for the benefit of the individuals and families served, as well as the cost savings over a lifetime of support. I witness the rewards daily both in my position as an Assistant Director at Children's Odyssey in Portland, a special purpose preschool, as well as in my 17-year-old son, a senior in high school. He is graduating with honors in June after a successful school experience that began with his early intervention services after receiving dual diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity and Generalized Anxiety Disorders.

While my son received the care and attention he needed during his years in preschool, over the years I have watched the availability of spots and qualified teachers dwindle. Community-based preschools serving students with special needs could close if they don't receive additional state support to provide federally required services. Without increased funding, hundreds of children could lose access to the educational services that they need, and their families will be left with no options for care.

As the person responsible for our preschool waitlist and child development service placements, I hear the despair from both parents' and caseworkers' alike as they search for programs to provide desperately needed services for their children. In the last few years, I have begun to hear from families that will need to send their children to Kindergarten having never received the services they qualified for on their individualized educational plans. Case managers are calling repeatedly as they watch deadlines for those services to be put in place pass without ability to help. Our waitlist number is over 200 yet we are losing teachers and educational technicians to higher paying positions without ability to entice qualified candidates to fill our vacancies.

Bill LD1309 will require educational reimbursement for 3-5 year-old, preschool students in a way consistent with reimbursements for students in K-12 and ensure that families can still have access to the preschool programs that their children need. Higher reimbursement rates will allow programs like Children's Odyssey to hire qualified teachers, reduce the turnover rates and provide services to more children.

Please fight for one of our most vulnerable populations by supporting fair compensation with an Act to Clarify Requirements for Payment of Tuition for Children with Disabilities by the Department of Education's Child Developments Services System. I am happy to discuss this further for any who would like to have a conversation about my experiences and perspectives.

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