

April 5, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I'm asking for your support of LD 1309, An Act to Clarify Requirements for Payment of Tuition for Children with Disabilities by The Department of Education's Child Development Services System.

My name is Tiffany Haskell and I am a special education director and school psychologist; part of my role at Waypoint (formerly known as Waban) is to oversee our Special Purpose Preschool, located in Sanford, Maine. Our program exists along a continuum of educational services for children with special needs; in our setting, the children require individualized support and comprehensive educational and therapeutic services to address significant learning, behavioral, and communication deficits. The children we serve typically have a diagnosis of Autism or other developmental disability. These intensive educational and therapeutic services provide children with the opportunity to prepare for success in Kindergarten and beyond. There is no doubt that investing in early intervention produces better outcomes for children and families and decreases needs and costs down the road.

While it may sound contrary to assumptions, CDS does not reimburse specialized preschool providers for educational services if the child has MaineCare insurance. There is a comprehensive system in place to establish educational costs, known as "tuition", for students who attend specialized K-12 programs; we are requesting parity and for this same mechanism be applied to specialized preschool educational services.

CDS continues to share their belief that the educational costs are "bundled" into the MaineCare rate. However, it has been and remains clear that education is a prohibited cost under MaineCare. Chapter 1 of the MaineCare Benefits Manual expressly prohibits "any services ... provided to members that are academic or educational in nature".

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, our facility was at capacity with over 60 students. At this time, we are serving half that number of children. Due to the workforce crisis in Maine and an inability to offer increasingly higher wages in this competitive environment, we have difficulty increasing the number of staff at a rate needed to provide more children with individualized support. We have only been able to add 3 students this school year and each has been a Kindergarten through Grade 5 student. We simply must make efforts to stabilize our budget with the goal of supporting the 18 preschool students we have at this time. In York County alone there are a reported 57 children awaiting a specialized placement; we could serve 30 of those children if CDS reimbursed for education because it would allow us to offer a truly competitive living wage to the highly sought-after bachelor's level staff required to fulfill these roles.

It's time to address this; it is indeed an emergency. The very future of specialized preschool services hangs in the balance; several programs have closed throughout the covid period, and more will be forced to close if this bill does not pass. The youngest children with special needs who require this level of service, and the specialized preschool programs that offer it, need your support.

Respectfully,  
Tiffany Haskell, Clinical Director  
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