

TESTIMONY REGARDING

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”

April 13, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, thank you for taking the time to hear testimony on this important bill.

My name is Laura Manuel, and I live in South Portland, Maine.

I am asking you to support 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.

This bill will ensure that community-based special purpose preschool programs receive adequate funding to provide critical early intervention services to young children with developmental disabilities. Below is my personal story of how important this is for children.

I would like to share a bit about the experience my family had with Woodfords, a special purpose preschool program in Westbrook, Maine. My son Aiden attended Woodfords for two years (ages 4 and 5). Aiden is a loving and intelligent child who absorbs every ounce of information he can obtain. Aiden is diagnosed with Autism and Apraxia (a significant speech and language delay). Prior to attending Woodfords, Aiden attended a local preschool. During this time, Aiden had three separate speech and language therapists and was on a never ending waiting list for school based occupational therapy. Three therapists were needed to fulfill service times due to schedules. Despite the best efforts of these talented therapists, there was no continuity and therefore very limited progress. Aiden’s friends consisted of his older sister (Madeline) and younger sister (Lydia).

Once Aiden received a spot in Woodfords his skills dramatically improved. Woodfords was able to provide comprehensive special education support. These services were both individualized as well as integrated into the classroom. It is extremely important for services to be integrated into the classroom setting for generalization of skills. In other words, using skills in the natural setting. Aiden had access to speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and special education social skills five days per week during the entire school day. This is dramatically different from three thirty minute isolated sessions per week. Aiden's skill development and learning was a natural part of his day. While other preschools have their strengths, this special education support is not possible for them to do based on education, resources, curriculum, etc. These comprehensive early intervention services provided to children with disabilities are only provided by community-based special purpose preschool programs.

Currently, Aiden is thriving in public school (Dora Small School, South Portland). Academically, Aiden is learning to read and write. Aiden follows the classroom expectations and is a helping friend to others. Additionally, Aiden requests playdates with multiple peers in his class. This brings tears to my eyes as Aiden now has the skills to initiate and maintain friendships. Aiden is a well adjusted and very happy six year old due to the skills he learned and confidence he gained during his two years at Woodfords, a community-based special purpose preschool program.

Thank you for the opportunity to tell my family's story today. I hope you will support LD 1309 to give all children with disabilities the early intervention services they need.

Below is an email I wrote to his preschool teacher on October 14, 2022 to express my gratitude:

Hi Julia,

I cannot thank you enough for being such a wonderful teacher to Aiden. Aiden is having a really positive transition to kindergarten and that is due to the skills he has learned from his time in your classroom. For example, his teacher reported him as being very responsible and respectful and I know the positive terms he uses when communicating come directly from your teaching. His service providers have also commented that he is comfortable asking clarifying questions. I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done for Aiden! We certainly miss you. I hope you are doing well with your new classroom.

Very Kindly,
Laura