



Testimony of Elisha Wyman & Kiersten Donahue, Owners, Dragonfly Academy

In 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

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

April 13, 2023

We are writing to ask your support for LD 1309 as both providers and as business owners. Dragonfly Academy, our special purpose private preschool program, has operated for years with only Section 28-level reimbursement. We have provided far more support and education than simply “specialized services”, and we deserve more comprehensive support for our staff and our kids.

In early 2013, after years of working in other behavior support programs, Kiersten and I decided to create a program that would truly honor and support young children with autism. Our vision involves positive reinforcement, strong bonds of trust between adults and children, and appropriate scaffolding to help meet kids’ needs.

Following two years of research, hundreds of questions to Child Development Services and MaineCare and the Department of Education, and a long search for an appropriate building, we were able to open our doors in September of 2015.

There is no handbook for setting up a program that works with CDS/Department of Education, but primarily bills MaineCare. We learned, step by step, while trying to put together our vision of a supportive and compassionate program. These have been an amazing, frustrating, and enlightening ten years. We have been bounced back and forth between CDS and MaineCare, with CDS insisting repeatedly that payment for their education services is “bundled” into the MaineCare rate. MaineCare in turn states clearly that they do not pay for education services, but medically necessary services only.

In the midst of this, our budgeting has become more challenging over the years. We are in a never-ending search for qualified, patient, positive staff – folks cannot work an uncertain schedule and still pay their own bills, so we see considerable turnover. We have never been able to offer benefits like health insurance. We have learned that neither Child Development Services nor MaineCare seems to have an accurate picture of their own role or each other’s role in funding special purpose preschool programs.



We spend so much time on state-required administrative tasks, but cannot bill for them. We have to send folks home if their assigned child is unable to attend, because our budget has been so slim. We run our program on a shoestring, focused only on providing the most optimal outcomes for each kiddo who arrives at our door. Without the recent MaineCare increase in Section 28 reimbursement, we were looking at the end of our program.

However, tuition payments for these kiddos would unquestionably change the entire special purpose program outlook for the better. We have learned to do more with less, but we want to do more with more. We want to offer a benefits package and pay rate that will allow us to keep our fantastic staff. We want to invest in sensory equipment, parent support classes, more training for our people. Tuition dollars would help make those a reality for us, and for programs like ours. Please vote for LD 1309. Our youngest special needs learners need your support!

Thank you for your time and consideration. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted,

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