

January 31, 2024

Testimony **FOR LD 2166** “An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder”

Chair Rafferty, Chair Brennan, Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Alan Cobo-Lewis. I live in Orono, as does my 23-year-old son with a disability. I am testifying in favor of LD 2166.

Although I have a professional interest in LD 2166, I am testifying today in my personal capacity to bring you a brief story about discrimination that my own son currently faces in Maine law and to encourage this Committee to take action to right that wrong.

In April 2022 the Governor signed PL 2021 chapter 635 (LD 1995), which appropriated \$20 million in account Z335 in FY 2023 to provide 2 years of free community college for all high school graduates in the classes of 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023.

In July 2023 the Governor signed PL 2023 chapter 412 (LD 258), appropriating an additional \$15 million (\$7.5 million per year in each of FY 2024 and FY 2025) to extend the benefit to graduates in the classes of 2024 and 2025.

I support these initiatives as far as they go. But I oppose their discriminatory nature.

My own son exited a Maine public high school in June 2022, shortly before he aged out of his federal IDEA guarantee on his 22nd birthday—though he remains protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Because he exited without a diploma (even without a state diploma issued by the Maine Department of Education), he is not a “graduate”. Therefore, even though his access to the general education curriculum was significantly adversely impacted by the covid pandemic, he was nevertheless categorically excluded, on the basis of his disability, by the State of Maine from post-secondary educational opportunities provided to other Maine students.

This is ableism. This is inequity.

It also reflects the fact that there are severely limited inclusive post-secondary opportunities currently available to students with intellectual disabilities in Maine—which itself represents ableism and inequity.

The Legislature and the Governor have the opportunity to right this wrong by spinning up inclusive post-secondary opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities in Maine.

Because such opportunities are currently so limited, the Legislature might consider creating a carrying account into which it can appropriate funds to make these opportunities available—going back at least to students who exited in the 2020 school year, regardless of whether they exited with a diploma. And also fund it going forward.

Toward this end, please support LD 2166 and identify it to the Appropriations Committee as a priority for funding.