

Catherine Cote
Livermore
LD 2120

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of LD 2120

My name is Catherine Cote. I am the owner and clinician of Essential Learning Solutions. We are a special purpose preschool located in Livermore Maine. We have children that attend our program from the Lewiston/Auburn area all the way to the Wilton/Weld area and everywhere in between. We provide programming for the most severely impaired children all of which are 1 on 1 and sometimes 2 staff to 1 student.

Back in 1989, I personally began my experience in special education as an Educational Technician. Although, we were called Developmental Therapists back then. Since that time, I have opened several early intervention programs both in Kansas and Maine.

The first program opened in Maine was in Livermore in 2014..... and then Lisbon a couple years later.

In August of 2021, ELS began the school year off as we normally did. Always excited about the new school year. We had many new students, several new staff and were ready to get back to teaching after a short break at the end of that Summer.

At that time, we had 2 special purpose programs one in Lisbon and one in Livermore. It was another very challenging year trying to staff for two programs while only being able to offer wages that wouldn't put both preschools under financially. Every year seemed to be a struggle to find qualified staff at the rates we could offer. This particular year was definitely THE most challenging.

Ultimately, in August of 2022, I had the gut-wrenching duty of calling parents and letting them know that we would be closing our doors at the end of that month due to serious financial constraints.....

Have you ever heard the desperation in the voice of a parent of a child with severe autism? It's absolutely gut wrenching and nothing that you ever ever want to hear.

And..... I had no answers.....no alternatives for them. Because all of the other preschools I knew of had to make the hard decisions to either close or stop taking children that come through the CDS system because financially they would fail.....like I had.

Luckily there was one specific program that worked with children with severe disabilities that was still open and taking CDS referrals. Thus, I begged the director to enroll some of our children so that they wouldn't be left without any therapy/programming. Unfortunately, that program closed in October 2023.

Having to constantly battle the system for funding and services for the severely impaired children year after year after year can just simply..... break your spirit. That is exactly what it felt like that Summer in 2022.

At some point in 2023, we received word about the bridge payments through CDS that might occur the following 2023-24 school year. I took a couple of days to gather more information and ask myself several questions.

Could I go back into business (financially)? Should I do this again? Why are you doing this again?

After being a few months away from the field, I knew this is what I had to do again. My spirit had been broken, but, it was not beyond repair.

As luck would have it, one of our preschool buildings had not sold yet when this news of the bridge payments broke. But, I knew this couldn't happen without some of the very staff that we had to lay off. Therefore, I put some feelers out and 8 of my previous staff decided to come back to work for ELS. That is all I needed to know.....

In September of 2023, ELS re-opened it's doors and we are currently at capacity with students and fully staffed which I don't think has EVER happened in ALL of the years that we were open.

Due to the bridge funding, we were able to offer wages to the staff they deserve for the incredibly challenging work that they do.

Due to the bridge funding, we are able to keep the incredible staff I currently have because we can now offer more benefits.

Due to the bridge funding, weI can provide appropriate up-to-date educational materials/supplies for the children

Due to the bridge funding, I am looking to open a second program which will allow program for many more children with severe disabilities.....in an area that is extremely underserved.

Due to the bridge funding, I MAY even be able to open a third program.....
Hopefully, you are getting the point here.....:)

At a crucial time in the lives of these children and at a time when Maine has hundreds of children on waitlists for specialized early education services, we cannot afford to lose programs well established and respected programs that can change the lives of hundreds of children with disabilities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,

Catherine Cote, M.A., BCBA