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L.D. 2166 An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Educational and Cultural Affairs Committee.

My name is Cathy Dionne. I live in Greene; I am the parent of a 29-year-old autistic adult and a grandparent of an autistic 3-year-old. I am testifying on behalf of the Autism Society of Maine Board of Directors as the Executive Director. I have been working in the field of Autism serving Maine families for 28 years at ASM and the society has been serving Maine families for 48 years.

I am here to offer testimony in support of L.D. 2166 An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder

Looking back when my son graduated in 2014 there were no opportunities for individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to go to secondary education. Something I believe my son could have accomplished with the proper programming.

Currently we offer graduating seniors in our state two free years of Community College which do not offer programming for students with I/DD and/or ASD. Maine has twenty-nine accredited colleges and universities compared to one program for individuals impacted by I/DD and/or ASD. This one program through St. Joseph's College has opened the door but we still have a long way to go. The cost factor is a barrier, without financial aid families cannot afford it. Post secondary programming statistically improves the chances of an individual with I/DD and/or ASD to become employed.

This proposed legislation provides the opportunity for dual enrollment for students 18-22 years old still publicly enrolled in school. It includes the requirement that each grant program meet the requirements to be a TPSID – a Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Program for students with Intellectual Disabilities under the federal Higher Education Opportunity Act. This is the standard that allows post-secondary students in such programs to apply for certain federal grants and work study programs.

There is work being done to braid funding for sustainability through Vocational Rehabilitation as well as the Lifespan Waiver (currently being designed). This grant program would assist that initiative.

Sincerely,  
Cathy E. Dionne, Executive Director/Parent/Grandparent