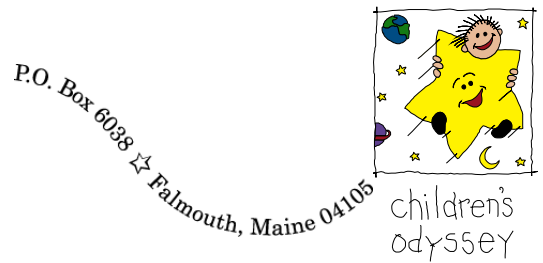


**Testimony of Andrea Hougaz-McCormick,
Assistant Director, Children's Odyssey**

In Support of LD 2120

***An Act to Fund the Delivery of Educational Services to Children with
Special Needs as Required by State and Federal Law in Special
Purpose Private Preschools***

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs



January 31, 2024

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. Thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony in support of LD 2120 *An Act to Fund the Delivery of Educational Services to Children with Special Needs as Required by State and Federal Law in Special Purpose Private Preschools*

In 2007 I was compelled into the world of early intervention when my 2 year old son began to show significant developmental delays ultimately leading to diagnosis' of Autism Spectrum Disorder, 22q11.2 Deletion Syndrome, Velopharyngeal Insufficiency, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and Non-Verbal Learning Disorder. Extensive waitlists through Child Development Services, underqualified staff, and lack of service providers created many challenges on his journey. Parker is now 19 years old, in his senior year of high school, and has just secured a job as the ice shoveler for the Maine Mariners! We are proud of his progress and thankful for the many early interventionists and special educators who helped him along the way.

Special education has since been a passion of mine. I completed a Master's Degree in Special Education and professionally I work in the field of Early Childhood Education. Over the last ten years providing appropriate reimbursement for our staff has become a substantial difficulty. Burn out is high, the employee market is increasingly underqualified, and children's needs continue to intensify. Teacher's within our classrooms respond to a wide variety emotional, physical, and verbal outbursts throughout their day. Without access to funding we continue to struggle to provide ample compensation for our staff, allowing us to thus provide for the growing number of children whose needs can not be met within a typical child care setting and with the continued closure of fellow programs.

I am asking you to support LD 2120 will ensure that we do not lose this momentum and ensures that the interim payment will continue into the next school year, or until such time that the daily rate is developed and implemented.

It is with immense gratitude that I send accolades for the funding support received last year as they resulted in our ability to further invest in our staff and program as well as allowing us to work towards hiring staff therefore opening slots to take more children off the extensive CDS waitlist. Also a special thanks to Representative Gattine and committee co-sponsors for bringing the bill forward, as well as the entire committee for taking the first step to establish an equitable payment for the critical educational services that special purpose preschools provide to hundreds of Maine's most vulnerable children each year.

At a time when Maine is out of compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and hundreds of families and children are already on waitlists for specialized early education services, we cannot afford to lose well established and well-respected programs and hundreds of spots that could change the lives and trajectory for children with disabilities.

Thank you for your taking the time to review this letter.

Respectfully Submitted,

Andrea Hougaz-McCormick
andrea@childrensodyssey.org