



Testimony of Scott Tash, Chief Executive Officer

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,

My name is Scott Tash, and I am the CEO at UCP of Maine. UCP of Maine has been serving individuals with a wide range of disabilities since 1954, and those services currently include programs for children 3 to 5 years old in center-based pre-school settings in the greater-Bangor area.

I also serve as a Board member for the Maine Association for Community Service Providers as Treasurer, and Chair of the Children's Committee and am pleased to offer this testimony in strong support of LD 2120 on behalf of our membership, our Children's Committee and my organization, UCP of Maine.

I want to thank Representative Gattine and committee co-sponsors for bringing the bill forward, as well as the entire committee for previously 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.

UCP of Maine has contracted with CDS and has served children in the Pre-K environment for approximately 20 years. During that time, we have enjoyed a strong, professional partnership with CDS, some years serving upwards of 50 pre-school children in our Bangor and Brewer locations. Within our preschool settings we operate both Special Purpose rooms as well as a regular education classroom which allows for more typically developing students to be enrolled than students with Individualized Education Plans, giving our students opportunities for peer modeling in many areas. Unfortunately, over the last several years prior to receiving the temporary daily rate for education services, we were forced to reduce our Pre-K capacity by 35% from our peak numbers, replacing with more sustainable programming such as our K-4 program for children with disabilities.

This under-funding had put us at a significant disadvantage in terms of recruitment and retention, commonly losing staff for teacher or ed tech positions at public schools with more robust compensation packages.

As disheartening as the operational impacts, even more so is we consistently have as many children on our waitlist as we are serving at any one time. Waitlist reductions are critical as we typically see

approximately 25% of these children turn aged 5 or 6 and transition to public school without ever having had pre-school programming identified as being needed in their IEP plan. They are missing the Early Interventions that we all agree are critical early in life.

While most recent history is bleak, there are positives on the horizon. With the establishment of the temporary daily rate for education services, and once the process and qualifications were clarified, with forecasts of the impact in hand, our organization moved forward with securing additional space, recently completing the necessary buildout, and are planning to open a new Pre-K classroom when final licensing approvals are obtained. In fact, this alone will increase our existing Pre-K capacity by up to 20%, and we currently project serving the first children in the new classroom by February 26th. If ongoing funding is secured through LD 2120, we would anticipate growing our Pre-K capacity in FY '25 as well.

Continuing, and ensuring the educational related payments next year and beyond would provide some stability for operational planning, giving confidence in the ability to expand the number of children served, reducing waitlist times that can span months or even years.

Our goal is to give every parent of a child currently missing out on critical services the chance to provide a statement like one of our recent families, when they shared:

“Our son’s social and verbal skills have blossomed since beginning the Bridges program at UCP. Friends and family can hardly believe how much he has improved. We’re confident that he will shine in kindergarten.”

It is critical that we do not lose this momentum, and LD 2120 ensures that the interim payment will continue into the next school year, or until such time that the daily rate is developed and implemented.

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

Respectfully Submitted,

Scott Tash

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