

2021 Full Legislative Session
HB 3350
Testimony for April 8, 2021

Chair Alonso Leon, Vice-Chairs and Committee Members,

For the record, my name is Roberta Lincoln. I work for the Dept of Human Services, but am here today as a private citizen of Oregon. I am a parent of two special needs children – boys - and I co-parent them with my identical twin sister. Both of our boys have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and are enrolled in the Salem/Keizer School District. Our older son is autistic and our younger son has a TBI. Prior to COVID-19 and Comprehensive Distance Learning (CDL), one of our boys spent half of his school-day in a special education classroom, and he required a one-to-one aide in each class, every school day. He needed high behavioral supports in school, although we never experienced those behaviors in our home.

After the start of the pandemic, when CDL began in March 2020, it was the beginning of great sorrows in our home. None of us contracted COVID-19, but the quality of life for all of us quickly deteriorated. My sister and I both work full time, and need to do so in order to pay our bills and support the boys with their myriad of mental, emotional, physical, educational and medical needs, including their costly, specialized, restrictive diets necessary because of each boy's severe allergies. I'm sure you have heard this before, and perhaps you have experienced it, as well. All of a sudden, we were also expected to become full-time teachers, teachers-aides, and special education providers like occupational therapists, communications specialists, autism specialists and information systems/computer experts... and we were supposed to suddenly know how to handle significant and severe behavioral issues that stemmed from having to attend school online from our living room.

Both boys require special, individual supports – for which neither my sister nor I are trained. Things were bad in our home. We didn't have access to Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD) support services for either child (such as a Personal Support Workers or Direct Support Providers) due to COVID-19 restrictions. And, no matter what our Special Education Attorney tried, she was unable to get the School District to provide the types of specialized or additional supports our children required in order for them to access the Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), to which they were entitled. **On a daily basis, our children cried and/or refused to attend classes** – they would sit in front of the computer screen but would not engage with their online classes, or would be completely lost and would ask a lot of questions which distracted the entire class. Every time the computers glitched for either child (which happened numerous times every hour), hysterics would ensue.

While most kids got a break over the summer months, our children both attended Extended School Year, because of their special needs. It was so difficult for our younger son that we had to physically hold him in front of the computer, because he hated online schooling so much and wasn't able to control himself in order to sit and attend class each day.

Then the new CDL school year started... and things had not improved. In fact, our younger son cried every day, throughout the day – in front of his class, begging not to have to “go” to online school. Our older son had NONE of the supports that he required, and was throwing furniture

when he experienced extreme frustration – because the school district could not stabilize their online schooling system. Every time the computer glitched (which it still does, every day, throughout each day), he would come unglued, and would scream and yell and throw things, then refuse to return to online class. Mind you, neither me nor my sister have any type of specialized training for how to deal with these behaviors - as we had never experienced them at home, prior to the pandemic.

By the end of October, both my sister and I were at our wit's end. All four of us felt severely depressed and were literally desperate and in **utter despair**. We were so overwhelmed that we were at the point of giving up. Arguments with School District staff and school educators happened regularly about FAPE. Even our Special Education Attorney made no headway with the School District; she said kids all across Oregon with special needs were experiencing the same thing – limited education and few supports – their special needs outlined in their IEPs were not supported. She encouraged us to apply for a COVID-19 Equity Grant through Creating Opportunities. We applied and were awarded the use of in-home tutoring services. Even though there was a health risk involved, we made the decision to allow someone to come into our home to provide help. We were quickly able to procure an in-home tutor for our boys – which we used throughout November and December.

The positive difference the tutor made was incalculable and unmeasurable. I am sure most of us have seen the MasterCard commercials on TV where they list the price for different objects, and at the end, they say the experiences for which the card paid were priceless. That's how we felt. Our children went from crying every day – ready to give up – to that priceless feeling of being valued and engaged in their school experience. Both of the boys' teachers agreed that the change in them was phenomenal. Instead of refusals to produce any work, they were both going above and beyond – exceeding all expectations. Both boys even worked with the tutor through the winter break, to try to catch up their schoolwork.

After the grant ended, following winter break, we were able to resume their I/DD in-person supports. As the Governor allowed, our sons were both able to access Limited In-Person Instruction (LIPI) for a few hours at school, a couple of times a week. Between the in-home supports, and the in-person supports at school, our boys are thriving and were much better prepared for the rest of the school year. Our younger son is back to school 2 days a week on his cohort days, and is learning to manage the CDL online learning days when he has in-home supports in place. Our older son is looking forward to returning to school on his cohort days later this month.

My sister and I are not trained educators, or special education providers. Left on our own, we would never have been able to help our boys succeed in CDL. Please let me clearly articulate this point -- receiving the supports that were necessary in order for our children to succeed -- was LIFE CHANGING for our family! Oregon's children who have special needs require additional supports for education – and most of them are not getting it.

There has been a cascade effect beyond our home and family – having those supports in place helped the school staff, as well. With the additional supports in place (ones they needed and were outlined in their IEPs), our sons' educators regularly comment about how they see significant improvement in our boys' attention and participation. They have also noted

significantly LESS tears, meltdowns and bad behaviors. When the in-home supports are in place, they actually enjoy comprehensive distance learning (CDL).

Better still, their teachers remark how they are able to better-teach their own classrooms online, more fluidly, when the in-home supports are in place. While the in-home workers are not tutors or helping with school work in any way, they are able to help our sons slow down, ask/answer questions, then redirect focus when the boys get off task, which is time that the teachers no longer have to take away from “teaching time” for everyone else. Having the additional supports in place in our home has even allowed our older son to complete assessments, because his frustration level is so much more manageable. The teachers agree that our boys are now happy and smiling, engaged and not crying throughout the day, because they have the supports in place that they require in order to access FAPE. The teachers have seen the boys’ anxiety levels reduce significantly, as well. **Putting in-home supports in place for the children was a win-win situation, because it helped the educators just as much as it helped the children.**

With the additional supports in place, we feel like a happy, cohesive family again. Instead of arguing with and fighting against the School District staff and educators, we are all able to work as a team, trying to find ways to work through and around the technology and other issues. Our sons have access to education now, and they have a feeling of pride in their accomplishments in school. They are starting to make progress toward catching up to the lost schooling. **Having the additional supports in place has made all the difference in the world. It has had a miraculously positive impact on our family, and we hope the same can happen for all the children in Oregon who need additional supports, so they too can receive the FAPE to which they are entitled.** Thank you for accepting my testimony concerning HB 3350.

Roberta Lincoln
Parent of special needs children