

"Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Thomsen and members of the Committee:
My name is Karen Houston. I live in Gresham, OR and I am here today to testify in support of Senate Bill 1578."

My son, Sam, is 11 years old. He is currently in the 6th grade. He loves school, swimming, camping, the ocean and hiking. He is autistic and due to sensory complexities and apraxia he is non-speaking. Sam's Individual Education Plan or IEP has many accommodations that make it possible for him to participate with his peers in a general education setting, if these accommodations are provided.

Sam requires 1:1 support from a trained adult in order to access general education. Sam has a communication device and modified curriculum that require that the staff person has training to work specifically with Sam. These accommodations are written into his IEP. He is a kinesthetic, hands on learner. In March of 2020, when virtual learning became a forced reality, Sam just had me. I lost my job because I was unable to work from home while caring for my son. I became Sam's 1:1 and it became obvious very quickly that he was not receiving an education during virtual learning equal to that of his older sister. Not even close.

Sam went from having four full school days per week, each day about 7 hours, to two 10 minute zoom sessions four days a week. These focused only on the learning goals in his IEP, math and reading. He was invited to log in to his general education class, though there was no way for him to have meaningful participation. Other services in his IEP, such as speech therapy and occupational therapy, while attempted to be delivered via zoom, were ineffective due to his communication complexities. My son went from having an opportunity to learn alongside his peers 1,680 minutes a week to 80 minutes per week. Though Sam was being offered virtual learning like all of his non-disabled peers, it was not offered in a way that was appropriate for him to be able to make progress on his goals, learn or participate. Sam soon began to display anxiety and stress every time I pulled the iPad out to turn on a zoom session. This escalated to the point that he completely shut down, screaming and often banging his head against the wall for long periods of time. My daughter could not participate in school because she didn't want to unmute herself due to the screaming. We finally had to put Sam on medication for the first time in his life and this helped alleviate some of his distress.

During these months, we met with the school many times to ask for appropriate methods of teaching that work for Sam; in person learning or a home tutor, anything but a screen. Time and again we were denied based on safety concerns.

When school began more in person instruction, hybrid and then in person in the fall of 2021, the staff assigned to work with him were untrained and often subs with no special education or autism experience. I begged for a trained, consistent staff person and was told there was no one. The school was desperately trying to hire staff and the staffing shortage became a crisis. The quality of Sam's educational experience for the past two years has been abysmal. His body was physically there, but no attempt was made to engage his mind or educate him. It has not been appropriate or comparable to his peers. Yes, they are in the building together. No, they are not receiving the same opportunity to learn. To truly provide students with an equitable learning experience, accommodations must not only be

created and placed into a student's IEP, but also followed by the school district. Sam spent most of his hours at school in the school yard, wandering alone, while an adult he had no rapport or relationship with followed him around. He soon grew anxious again with no routine and no meaning in his days. Months of mental health and physical health complications followed and we had to remove him from school. While we have recently taken positive steps with his team to get him back to school in a meaningful way, there is still a long ways to go to ensure that Sam receives a meaningful and appropriate education alongside his peers.