

Submitter: Mara McLoughlin
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Education
Measure: SB531

Dear Senate Committee:

IRL Social Skills was the grateful recipient of grant funds through the Oregon Summer Grant Program. This grant enabled our multidisciplinary, neurodiverse team of speech therapists, occupational therapists, direct support workers, and mental health providers to provide scholarships for autistic and other socially struggling teens, young adults, and their parents.

We used UCLA's evidence-based Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills, or PEERS curriculum. PEERS is taught in 125 countries and in 12 different languages. According to the University of North Carolina National Clearinghouse for Autistic Evidence and Practices report, no other social-emotional manualized curriculum exists with the research base to back its efficacy at such a profound level.

Classes were taught entirely via Zoom, enabling us to serve students in rural areas.

Autism and other disabilities that impact one's social interaction and social communication are widely misunderstood. Most providers want to work with pre-school and elementary school students. However, as students enter adolescence, we experience a shift: from play-based relationships to those based in conversation and common interests. As a result, these students require more support. In reality, the services diminish once students move on to middle and high school, not to mention post-high transition age.

We know that autism, social anxiety, ADHD, and other common disabilities have a major impact on social skills. Further, when humans are peer rejected, socially isolated, shunned, and excluded, it impacts our mental health. We all experienced the mental health impacts of social impoverishment induced by the COVID pandemic. We also know that, when we have at least one reliable friend, the negative impacts of depression and anxiety are mitigated. For those who were already struggling socially, the pandemic further increased the mental health impacts of social isolation. We are humans, and humans are social, regardless of one's neurotype.

Social skills intervention in the schools fails on several counts: 1) the dosage is too low; 2) an evidence-based social skills curriculae is usually not implemented, and 3) there is no parent training component. Because social skills are the most functional skills anyone can learn, they need to be explicitly taught to these students. We must

also address the trauma that comes from being rejected and bullied, because of one's differences. Finally, parents need the skills to effectively help their child navigate the social world.

IRL Social Skills served 100% disabled students with the Oregon Summer Grant Program funds. Of all the families we served, 66.7% were in middle school, 20% were in high school, and 13.3% were transition age (recent high school graduates, including a transgender class valedictorian). Further, 83.3% were BIPOC students receiving free and reduced lunch, and 16.7% identified as transgender.

All students and their parents achieved statistically significant improvements in their knowledge and real-life implementation of these skills, according to our quantitative and qualitative data. Testimonials include the following:

"The class was a total game changer. Within three weeks there were already noticeable changes with social skills. It's hard to watch your child struggle with making friends, in fact it was heart breaking for me as the parent. I was lost on how to help because I too am an introvert. This class tackles the whole issue. It gives parents tools to help and kids skills to go out there and makes friends." - parent of transgender middle school student

Given the dearth of services for these students, and the dire employment and suicide statistics for autistic people, it is imperative that the Oregon Senate release more funds through SB 531 to help these students with skills that will benefit them for the rest of their lives as we build a more authentically connected world.