

To: House Committee on Education
From: *Colleen Douglas, CCC-SLP, Multnomah Early Childhood Program*
RE: Support for HB 2959

Chair Neron, Vice-Chairs Wright and Hudson and members of the committee—

My name is Colleen Douglas, and I am here today as a Speech Language Pathologist of 8 years, 7 serving as an early childhood special educator speech language pathologist. I am here to express my support for House Bill 2959.

As a trained healthcare professional in the education system, I am both licensed and practice within a unique educational setting of Early Childhood. I drive from around East Multnomah County service children with recognized Communication Disorders or other identified areas of need. I serve children in their “natural environments”, which most often means in a preschool or daycare setting, or in a child’s home.

I wear two hats at all times - an educator and a speech-language pathologist. My ultimate goal is to help the children on my caseload thrive within their education environment. My specific area of expertise is to help them communicate in order to improve their participation in their daily routines - be them at home or in a site environment. And like ALL educators, I believe our students deserve the best possible educational journey at every turn.

In the past few years, it has been hard to stay optimistic regarding the state of our education system nationwide. I participate much less often in “politics” because I have become so jaded by the struggle and the personal investment with the lack of results, so I come here somewhat skeptical. But as a proud Oregonian, an educator and a mother, I come before you today out of need, to request your assistance to improve the quality of education - for all educators, including medical professionals. If it requires a task force to analyze the data and make recommendations, then so be it. But if you have been listening to educators since the Student Success Act, then you all already know there have been solutions identified, but Oregon politicians have not been able to make those solutions a reality. However, our struggles as educators have not changed - we are understaffed, underpaid, our caseloads and classroom sizes are too large and the student’s basic “well being” needs are too high for them to meet the academic achievements we as educators are striving to give them.

You will hear, or you have already heard, from many Medical Professionals who struggle with caseload size and the systemic and impossible barriers to providing adequate services to students who have such a high need for support. Our work requires us to fulfill ODE IFSP and IEP contracts and to maintain the high ethical and effective standards for our professional licensure. Medical professionals provide specialized support for students with communication, social, cognitive or motor needs for approximately 30-120 minutes per week (depending on the student and their needs) and we are required to maintain accurate logs, billing, and communication with a support team and families. This demands a caseload of approximately

20-40 students per medical professional - depending on your setting and specific caseload. I work in the Early Childhood setting in Multnomah County, so another element of my drive is self-transporting from place to place to serve the children. Other school based SLPs, OTs, and PTs often have to drive from campus to campus, within their district to support children for 10 minutes per visit - which can be illegal and is certainly not effective or ideal.

Another specific aspect of my job is that as a “home visitor” Early Interventionist, I am more so than any other professional in a person’s life (such as clinical/medical professionals, school-based teachers or social workers). I am going into a student’s home on a weekly basis. And if the family is unable to meet their basic needs - housing, hygiene, mental health, safety, finances, food/resource security - then I end up being faced with the impossible task of helping them find access to resources - because they are not capable of focusing on their child’s unique needs when they are struggling so severely.

One very specific reason that Multnomah Early Childhood Program has 27 job vacancies and a 33% turnover rate for new hires, is that we are regularly tasked with being a social workers for a community that is in crisis. At MECP, we have access to 1 Mental health worker to support 2000+ families - and all he can possibly do is connect them to an outside agency with a massive waitlist or offer them limited crisis support.

The challenge for medical professionals in the Early Childhood setting is very relatable to school based medical professionals. We are not supported adequately - our caseloads are too high, we are wearing too many hats - such as mental health workers, social workers, teachers, and medical professionals. And the needs in our community are too high to serve with our outdated “old school” models and 20:1 student teacher ratios for preschools or high schools. When students are in crisis, they need connections with adults they can trust, and specialized attention.

But I come today not just to share the struggle, but also to offer simple solutions - one that we all truly know will help solve the crisis’ plaguing schools, educators, medical professionals, students and families.

It is my core belief that if you reduce the Student to Teacher ratio and dramatically increase pay for all classified and certified educators, across all education environments from pre-K to high school, and hire staff accordingly to this plan and increase access to mental health in all school settings, the state of Oregon will see dramatic improvements in the reduction of: “Teacher/staff burnout” and inadequate staffing. You will reduce mental health and violent crises that are plaguing schools, children and parents. Those changes will decrease caseloads for medical professionals and increase positive outcomes for students such as - social skills, academic performance, improved mental health for all, and increase graduation rates.

Thank you for your time today and I encourage the committee to vote YES on HB 2959. As a citizen, I am often dumbfounded by the barriers to making real changes that are effective. I want to trust politicians and believe that the money we pay in taxes - locally and federally - can be used effectively. So please don't abuse this power, but instead allocate resources appropriately to make effective and real changes in supporting students, educators and our schools! Please use your elected position of power to make an effective change immediately.

Colleen Douglas
Speech-Language Pathologist
Multnomah Early Childhood Program