

March 14, 2023

TO: Senate Education Committee

RE: Support for SB 575, Students With Disabilities Success Plan

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Weber, and Member of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 575. My name is Sharon Juenemann and I live in SE Portland.

I'm writing to support SB 575, the Student with Disabilities Success Plan. SB 575 is a top priority of the 2023 Children's Agenda. Students with disabilities face disproportionate systemic inequities, which have led to the worst outcomes of any student group in our state. Students with disabilities have the lowest graduation rates in Oregon, experience a forty-plus gap in basic reading and math by eighth grade, and continue to be disciplined twice as often as other students.

Ableism is the root cause of these inequities among students with disabilities and must be addressed. It is essential to implement policies and practices that promote inclusion, accessibility, and equity for students with disabilities to eliminate systemic barriers. This includes ensuring professional development on best practices for teachers and staff, collecting better data, and prioritizing the engagement of families and students with disabilities through the Special Education Advisory Councils.

As the parent of a now-15 year old child with disabilities, I have witnessed ableism in our public education systems for more than 10 years. As I wrote in a recent Op-Ed published in The Portland Tribune, my child was suspended from kindergarten in their SE Portland elementary school because their teachers lacked the training and the resources to support their learning and social emotional needs. My child suffered lasting emotional damage from the year and a half they spent in a school where they were seen as a constant "problem." But the "problem" was not within my child. Because when we changed to a different school, one where all staff and administrators understood neurodivergence and sensory needs, my child ceased to be a problem and suddenly became a model student, classroom leader, and helper of other students with disabilities. I am happy to report that my child is now a high school sophomore in SE Portland, maintains a 4.0 GPA in honors classes, is treasurer of their class, and was part of the team that placed 4th in State in the Classroom Law Project's We The People Constitution competition. In other words, my child is a civic-minded leader just like many of you hearing this testimony today, who is committed to making this world a better place.

But I do not want to hold my child up as unique in any way. The thing is, there are 78,000 special education students in Oregon, and far too many of them have the same beginning as my child. Constant struggles, misunderstood by teachers, suspended from schools, or simply given up on because of their learning challenges. I want all those children to have the same ending as my child. I want them all to have teachers who believe in them, understand their learning needs, and armed with tools they need to meet those needs. The Student Success Plan for Students with Disabilities is a critical piece of legislation to make my child's current success a reality for every student with disabilities.

I urge your support of SB 575 to implement targeted strategies for students with disabilities to ensure their educational success and dismantle ongoing inequities that lead to disproportionate educational outcomes. I urge your support of SB 575 to establish the Students with Disabilities Success Plan so that all students have the resources they need to thrive.

Sincerely,
Sharon Juenemann