

Submitter: Hannah Erickson
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Education
Measure: SB595

Dear Senators,

I know a lot of people think of TAG as something “extra,” like educational dessert. A thing I’ve heard a lot is: “Those kids will be fine, they’re already smart.”

Let me tell you about my son, Shane.

Shane learned to read when he was 3. He figured out math around the same time. I never pushed him – that’s just how he is. So you think he’d be a rock star in school, right?

Not so much. Shane floundered in kindergarten. He wouldn’t do the work. Small wonder: The teacher was drilling kids on what sound “i” makes, and he was already reading at a sixth-grade level. He was bored out of his skull. Because the teacher had no training in TAG, she assumed he was just lazy. Worse, she never caught the things he really had challenges with because she assumed he was “fine.” Shane’s 10 now, and his handwriting is still slow, laborious, and illegible, because his teacher didn’t know that many TAG kids develop “asynchronously” – they might have the vocabulary of an 11-year-old and fine-motor skills of a 3-year-old.

We had Shane tested for TAG in kindergarten, but his 99th percentile scores didn’t change things. His neighborhood school (we’re in the Portland Public Schools district) didn’t have any TAG services. Teachers mostly just stuck him in the back of the classroom with a book and let him read quietly. In his boredom, he began to act out and self-harm. He would come home with his fingers and lips chewed bloody out of boredom and misery.

Even worse was the bullying. He had almost no friends. Kids made fun of him for how he talked. One day in first grade the teacher asked the class to name their favorite dinosaur, and when Shane said the Allosaurus, his classmates laughed and said he was making it up. (He wasn’t. It’s real.) At recess, some of them beat him up as punishment. The calls from the principal stacked up and up, and while even she acknowledged that Shane needed different curriculum to meet his academic capabilities, the only thing that school ever did with his TAG scores was to lose them and deny they existed. (Fortunately, I’ve learned to keep my receipts.)

There was one school in all of PPS set up for kids like Shane: ACCESS Academy. But you need to lottery in, and there are only a handful of openings in each grade.

Finally, in third grade, he got in.

It was like night and day. Even though this was the pandemic year of online school, Shane finally started to make friends. He joined the student-run Geography Club. He met kids who liked his vast knowledge about his favorite topics – and who shared their own strange fields of expertise. When in-person school finally started back up, he came home with stories of making friends.

Today, in fifth grade, you wouldn't recognize him. At ACCESS, he gets to take sixth-grade math. He's actually challenged, which helps him stay engaged. And his peers respect his academic skills. When he won the school spelling bee, they chanted his name and paraded him down the hallway.

It's not perfect. Shane is autistic – something his neighborhood school teachers never realized, but that the teachers at ACCESS understand because they are familiar with the neurodivergence of many TAG kids – and he still has challenges. PPS only has one school to serve TAG kids and it isn't centrally located, so it's a long bus ride from our North Portland home. He'll never get to do after-school activities because of the commute. But it's so much better than it was. He's stopped chewing his lips and fingers. He looks forward to school every day.

When people assume that TAG kids will be "fine" no matter what – think about Shane. He wasn't "fine" when he had no services that met his needs. He was miserable, and lonely, and failing.

And Shane is the lucky one. He had parents with the resources and knowledge to advocate for his needs. Every TAG kid should get the same opportunities Shane has. I don't know if this bill will get us there, but it's a start.