

March 27, 2023

To: House Committee on Education

From: Angela Bonilla, President, Portland Association of Teachers

Re: Support for HB 2895 to remove the cap on amounts distributed from State School Fund to school districts for students eligible for special education as children with disabilities.

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

My name is Angela Bonilla, and I am a bilingual Instructional Coach at Scott School and am currently serving as the President of the Portland Association of Teachers. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in front of you today to express my support for HB2895 and removing the cap on amounts distributed from the state school fund to school districts for students eligible for special education.

I appreciate that this bill exists, and allows for additional funding based on students with disabilities who are also experiencing homelessness, as we have over 6600 students experiencing homelessness in Portland Public Schools, as identified in our ODE report card last year.

At PPS, we currently have between 16-20% of our students currently receiving or in the pipeline to receive Special Education Services. Right now, the state school fund only provides additional funding up to 11% of the student population. This causes a disparity which hinders our ability to provide the services our students need.

In special education, we talk a lot about following the data and not pre-determining the placement or fate of our students. The students and families show us what they need and we use our expertise to decide how to serve those students. Unfortunately, our funding from the state does not follow the data. If we have a larger population of students with needs, or do work to reduce the biases that may interpret certain behaviors as violent vs as a call for help or a manifestation of a disability, we will not be provided the funding needed to serve those students before us.

Even the current cap – 11% – is incongruent with the data. The US Department of Education data shows 15% of students nationally were identified for special education services as of 2020-2021. In Oregon, 2020–2021, that percentage is 14%. In PPS, that percentage is even higher. That means that the current model forces districts to choose which students to prioritize, and pre-determines the level of support available for students based on funding as opposed to providing the level of support based on need. This is unethical and forces our educators to make difficult choices: Attempt to follow each student's Identified Education Plan despite the lack of staff, time and resources to do so, or admit it is impossible to fulfill the IEP and put their license in jeopardy.

In addition to raising the cap, we need more funding allocated to the State School Fund in order to support a lifted cap. Lifting the cap and increasing the State School Fund to support current Special Education levels at our schools will ensure that we have the funding necessary to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education for all students, a cornerstone of IDEA.

Author Sonya Renee Taylor states, "We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature."

We call on our elected officials to join us in stitching this new garment by believing in our ability to do better by our students, by removing the cap on Special Education disbursements and by increasing the state school fund to meet the increased need. Our students deserve a quality education and we should not rob Paul to pay Peter; Now is the time to invest in our students and our future. It is time to build a new normal, one that ensures each student gets what they need to access their education.

I encourage the committee to support HB 2895 and increase funding to the State School Fund to match. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Angela Bonilla
President
Portland Association of Teachers