

May 8, 2023

Good afternoon Members of the House Committee on Education,

My name is Karen Houston. I live in East Multnomah County. I have two children that attend public school. My son Sam, who experiences autism, is 13 years old and in the 7th grade. Sam has not attended a full day of school since March of 2020 when he was in the 4th grade. I would like to be there in person or virtually to provide testimony today, but because Sam is on a shortened school day, I am caring for him during this time.

Sam was unable to attend virtual learning during the pandemic due to the way he experiences autism. Sam is non-speaking and requires a high level of one on one support for sensory and behavior needs. He requires adult supervision constantly while awake to keep him safe and healthy. The pandemic, the lack of in person education, routine and isolation caused a high level of emotional distress and anxiety for Sam that we are still working through today. When Sam resumed in person school in the 6th grade, we sent him back full days. It took a few months, before Sam was able to communicate to us through his behavior that he was in distress and crisis. Further inquiries with the school yielded information that Sam's trained one on one instructional aide had quit without notice at the beginning of the year and he had been with a steady rotation of unfamiliar substitutes for several weeks. He had not been able to physically enter his 6th grade classroom with his peers or access any education during this time. He began screaming and self-injurious behaviors. Now his full school days included being in an isolated room, alone with an adult (who rarely got her breaks) watching Disney movies on an iPad. We pulled him from school and only brought him back on a reduced schedule several weeks later when they had hired trained staff to work with him. By now, his anxiety and behavior were at an all-time high. The rest of 6th grade was spent on reduced days, mainly alone with an adult, separated from his peers and receiving very little regarding his IEP supports or goals.

Out of concern for Sam's emotional well-being and unsure what consistency the school could provide, we began 7th grade on reduced school days. My son's special education teacher left abruptly in October of 2022 and the position is still vacant today. The one on one instructional aide that was hired and trained specifically to work with Sam during his shortened school days abruptly left the middle of March. The turnover is nauseating and heart breaking. Sam requires one on one staff that are familiar with him, his communication device, his IEP and the goals and supports that are outlined in that document. Without the school district being able to provide the supports in Sam's IEP, we cannot send him to school. Let me rephrase that. We COULD send him to school, we choose not to because we are trying to build our son up, not break him. I wish I could be more eloquent or explain our choice to keep him home better. All I can say is, the school district would take him full days and put some rotation of warm bodies with him and legally they would be covered, but my son is a human being and a child. He cannot use words to speak. He is underestimated, seen as a behavior instead of the brilliant young boy that he is and I cannot send my vulnerable child into that mess again. Not until there is some reassurance that public schools will protect him, follow his IEP, provide trained and familiar, trusted staff and access to a meaningful education.

This bill is essential for the safety and well-being of our special education students in the State of Oregon. This has reached crisis level in every school district across the state. It cannot wait. We have to protect these kids now. This bill provides common sense language and accountability that public schools should already be providing students and parents. Please help us keep public schools accountable for the services that they already receive funding for in order to provide inclusion and education for Oregon's most vulnerable students.