

Dear Chair Neron and members of the House Committee on Education:

As President of the Marysville Elementary School parent-teacher organization in Portland Public Schools, I strongly endorse HB 2953 to lift the 11% cap on special education (SPED) services. Our Title I neighborhood elementary school in SE Portland exemplifies why the current 11% cap is untenable.

According to Portland Public Schools (PPS) data, 21% of Marysville's K-5 students receive special education services. This does not include students currently being evaluated or our pre-kindergarten students with Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs). In total, about 25% of our students require special education services this year—more than twice the number funded under the 11% cap, far above the average 15% average for Oregon schools and the 17% for all of Portland Public Schools.

Marysville has piloted a district model for including students with IEPs and IFSPs in general education classrooms, and provided additional support both inside and outside the classroom. Our pilot shows that in order to fully engage this inclusion model, more trained staff and resources are essential. The sheer number of students requiring high levels of support has stretched our schools staff and resources too thin. Some children are not receiving the special education services they are legally entitled to, thereby preventing them from receiving the education they are required by law to have.

The Impact of Underfunding

One of the most urgent consequences of under-funding special education is a sharp rise in “big behaviors” among students, both with and without IEPs. Many students at Marysville face childhood trauma, housing instability, and learning disabilities, resulting in complex social-emotional and behavioral needs. When adequate support is unavailable, this manifests in disruptive and sometimes dangerous behaviors.

Examples from Marysville:

Classroom evacuations:

- One kindergarten class had multiple students whose behaviors required regular *room clears* (where the rest of the class must leave for safety). The only solution was to create an entirely new kindergarten classroom with a teacher who has experience in special education. However, budget constraints made hiring a new teacher impossible. Instead, the school reassigned a reading specialist to be the new kindergarten teacher—removing critical reading support for other students with special needs.
- *Room clears* happen in higher grades as well, due to disruptive/violent acts such as throwing desks and chairs.

Teacher turnover and burnout:

- One of our teachers resigned over winter break due to escalating big behaviors. The breaking point came when she was hit by a student, causing a blackeye. She was one of Marysville's most beloved teachers. That teacher that every student hopes to have.
- Marysville has an incredible staff, many of whom have been here for 10+ years. However, the reality of teacher burnout is glaringly obvious. Working daily with so many high-needs students and extreme behaviors has resulted in significant secondary trauma for educators. They are dedicated, but they are being worn thin.

Students with IEPs not receiving full services (in turn restricting access to curriculum):

- One of our kindergarten classes at one point was about half kids requiring services, including severe social-emotional challenges and significant trauma histories. The general education kindergarten teacher, though dedicated, was not equipped to handle such a high number of students with intensive needs.
- One child with ASD is supposed to have a paraeducator assigned exclusively to him, but that paraeducator is also responsible for three other children needing services—one of whom is a highly impacted child living with autism, is nonverbal, and not yet toilet-trained. Through no fault of the school, and without placing blame on the district, there is simply a lack of funding for enough staff, adequate support, and training for educators.
- An upper-grade classroom has two students with IEPs requiring 1:1 paraeducator support. This year, they have been assigned a single paraeducator between the two of them. One student has explosive behaviors that demand most of the paraeducator's attention, while the other—who has autism and struggles with transitions—has been left to “fade into the background.” Last year, with dedicated support, this student made great progress. This year, their ability to engage and learn has significantly declined.

Why HB 2953 Matters

The 11% cap was set 30 years ago. Much has changed since then, as the committee well knows. If the legislature sets a new cap—even one at 15% — they will underfund Portland Public Schools immediately, and risk underfunding students statewide within a few years.

As the committee is also aware, the number of students needing significant support is expected to keep rising. National studies show a growing prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), severe social-emotional trauma, and behavioral challenges among children. These trends underscore the importance of continued resources and strategic planning to meet the increasing needs in our schools.

Our students are our future, and providing them with a high-quality education is one of the most effective ways to address broader societal challenges such as homelessness, poverty, unemployment, addiction, and mental health issues. I strongly support HB 2953's approach: rather than imposing a new limit, we must lift the cap entirely. Oregon must fund services based on the actual number of students in need, rather than relying on an outdated and arbitrary percentage.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent issue, and for seeking public input. We take this responsibility seriously and appreciate the opportunity to share our experiences.

Sincerely,

Gwen Wilson

On behalf of the Marysville Family Club