

LEAH TUCKER

February 17, 2025

Representative (Chair) Courtney Neron
Representative (Vice-Chair) April Dobson
Representative (Vice-Chair) Emily McIntire
House Committee on Education
Oregon Legislative Assembly
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97309

Re: Support of House Bill 2953 removing the percentage cap on the amount of moneys distributed for special education

Chair Neron, Vice-Chairs Dobson and McIntire, and Esteemed Members of the Committee,

I may have had the pleasure of meeting some or all of you this session in my professional capacity as a contract lobbyist. Today though, I am writing to you as a mom of a beautiful child on the large special needs spectrum in hopes of adding my voice to the long list of those also in support of House Bill 2953.

My child was born with a rare chromosome disorder that came with global developmental delays and a laundry list of medical challenges and disabilities. Our first few years of their life was incredibly challenging as we spent most days and nights sitting in hospitals just hoping beyond all hope that our sweet baby would survive a few more minutes... and a few more minutes... and a few more minutes.

As days went by, we were amazed at this little person's resilience and determination to not just survive but thrive. Eventually, we began spending less days in hospitals and doctor's offices and found ourselves suddenly sitting in teacher's classrooms, principal's offices, and various meetings trying to address this strong-willed child's educational needs. I never

could've imagined that the second set of rooms would be the more difficult of the two stages of their life.

From miscommunication moments that almost cost our child their life due to food allergies to regression of hard-won progress due to lack of support and instructors who could help keep us moving forward. We fought for everything we achieved, which was far less than they were capable of.

I vividly recall one of our biggest fights brought together the teachers, aids, principal, district psychologist, district director of special education, the teachers' union rep, and countless others because the school was pushing to remove my child from the special education classroom where they were *finally* thriving after years of struggling and barely functioning both in and out of the classroom. I know now that the school was short on funding and needed to cut back on how many students were in the special education classroom. My child was doing better than others, so he was chosen to be the "sacrifice." Unfortunately, he was doing well because he was finally in a supportive environment.

I won that fight, but now I wonder at what cost to another student who needed those supports as well. And what would my child's disruptions in a general education classroom have done to those students' learning progress if a single teacher is attempting to manage my child along with 30+ other students? This would be the case we would battle in the years after that moment when we agreed to mainstreaming even though we knew the teachers didn't have the support they needed and neither did my child. Unfortunately, our choice was a special education classroom that didn't challenge my child or a mainstream classroom that challenged everyone in ways that were not productive.

Teachers and administrators should not have to choose which students thrive and which students will be left behind because of an arbitrary number attached to how schools use our tax dollars. Parents should not have to decide between their child's success, their sanity through the fighting required to get the support they need for that success, or a supportive classroom that sadly doesn't push them to reach their fullest capabilities. Students with disabilities should not be held to some arbitrary cap that only allows them to receive part or only allows some of them to receive part of the support and education services they deserve. It is an antiquated way of viewing this portion of the community and their abilities in education and in the community as a whole. They can do so much more if given the support and the chance to do so.

Today, my child is almost 23 years old. Looking at my child today, I often wonder what they could have done, where they could be today if they had gotten the support they truly needed from day one in school. My child survived and thrived in their first years of life

because it was all hands on deck. Everyone from our doctors and nurses to administrators, employers, families, and even our insurance companies engaged on their respective levels throughout those years to ensure that this child didn't just survive but thrived. I doubt they did all of that work just to have such barriers to continued thriving be placed in our way in the schools later in their life. I was talking with my mom recently and she asked me what the world would've lost if Stephen Hawking had been forced to go through his younger years with the disability of ALS "holding him back" only because society wasn't/isn't willing to put in the effort to ensure he thrived. Every child can do miraculous things and achieve great heights when provided the right support in their early, formative years, including those with disabilities.

I can't express enough my desire to see education as a whole funded to its fullest and most complete levels. The future of our society depends on the education of our children. Today, I hope you will take the first step and support funding our special education students who can do more, be more, and be more engaged and productive parts of their communities with the right education and supports to help them get there, just like every other student.

Thank you for your time and consideration, but more importantly, thank you for continuing to support and fight for our children and their futures.

Sincerely and with warmest regards,

Leah Tucker