

Testimony in Support of SB 953

To the Honorable Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Megan Gallagher and I am the parent of a creative, smart, and joyful Autistic child in the Beaverton School District. I am writing to express my strong support for Senate Bill 953, which seeks to establish a task force dedicated to developing best practices for the transition from Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) programs to kindergarten. As a parent who is currently facing these transition challenges, I believe this bill is an important step toward ensuring that children with disabilities are supported not only in their educational growth, but also provided with a safe school environment in which they can thrive physically, socially, and emotionally.

My child has not yet transitioned into kindergarten, but the process is already proving to be a significant concern for our family. At her most recent Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) meeting, the school district was invited to attend to discuss how to best support her transition, but they did not participate. There are currently no plans for the special education staff at our neighborhood school she is enrolled in to meet my child prior to the start of the school year. This lack of preparation is deeply troubling. Furthermore, when we have expressed a desire for them to actually meet our child prior to her first day of kindergarten, we have received either push back or received no response. Both the Multnomah Early Childhood Program and Northwest Educational School District, where our child receives Early Childhood Special Education Services, have attempted to facilitate communication with the district, but have not been successful. As a parent, this leaves us feeling powerless, scared, and further erodes our trust in the public education system in our state.

As a parent of a child with autism, I know firsthand the challenges that come with transitioning into a new school environment. Children like mine may experience anxiety, difficulty with change, and a need for structured routines, but the issue goes beyond just social and educational concerns. Many children with autism, like mine, have a tendency to wander, which poses a serious physical safety risk. On her first day of school, if my child were to wander or get lost, the staff wouldn't even know who she is—the only person in the school who would know who she is, is her seven year-old sister. This is not just about educational growth—this is about ensuring my child's physical safety.

SB 953 would create a task force that can develop and recommend best practices to ensure that school districts are better prepared for the specific needs of children with disabilities during the transition to kindergarten. By establishing clear, evidence-based guidelines, this bill can help ensure that children like mine are given the attention, planning, and safety measures they need during this critical time. The task force would help create a system that ensures communication between early childhood providers and Kindergarten staff, and that school personnel are properly informed and prepared for the specific needs of each child, including potential safety concerns prior to the first day of kindergarten.

The best practice recommendations generated by the task force could be used as a foundation for future legislation, policies, and programs that school districts can use to shape their practices, ensuring a more consistent, equitable, and safe experience for all children with disabilities across Oregon.

The transition from ECSE to Kindergarten should be a well-planned and coordinated process. Unfortunately, for many families, it's marked by gaps in communication and a lack of preparation. In our case, the lack of communication and preparation creates not only a social and educational risk for my

child but also a significant safety concern. Children with autism need more than just reactive or generic plans—they need proactive measures and individualized plans to ensure their safety in the school environment on day one. The Autism mom groups I'm a part of are full of comments every spring with questions about how to get the districts and schools to listen to parents to ensure that everybody is prepared for the transition to Kindergarten; and then come fall, you see numerous posts about difficulties their children are having in Kindergarten—suspensions, restraint and seclusion, kids returning home in soiled clothing, eloping (and sometimes staff not even realizing the child was missing), and more. This bill, and the taskforce it creates, provide a solution by creating a framework for school districts to follow, ensuring they are prepared to support children with disabilities effectively.

Without clear best practices in place, many children, including mine, will continue to face unnecessary risks, and their transitions will remain a difficult and anxiety-filled experience for both them and their families. SB 953 offers an opportunity to prevent these gaps in service and ensure that children with disabilities are welcomed into kindergarten with the support and preparation they need to succeed.

As a parent, I strongly urge you to support SB 953. This bill is a critical step toward making sure that children like mine, and all children with disabilities, can transition to kindergarten safely and successfully. It will provide much-needed guidance to school districts, ensuring that they are better equipped to meet the needs of children with disabilities, addressing both their social and physical well-being.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue. I hope you will take action to pass SB 953, which will have a lasting, positive impact on the lives of children like mine and families across Oregon.

Sincerely,
Megan Gallagher