

Chair Neron and members of the committee,

My name is Moira Finnegan and I have worked as a Speech-Language Pathologist with Portland Public Schools for 14 years.

My job is to evaluate and treat children with communication disorders. I help students who struggle to speak clearly. I also help students who have language processing difficulties that make it hard for them to pick up new vocabulary and concepts, or to become proficient readers and writers. I help students learn how to use conversation skills to make friends and to problem-solve confusing situations or conflicts that may come up at school. And I help students who have a limited ability to talk, by teaching them how to use high tech devices to communicate with the world around them.

There are many things I love about my job. There are also things that make my job really hard. Probably the hardest thing about my job, and the job of so many of us working in special education, is the fact that we don't have enough staff to meet the needs of our students.

The only way for school districts to provide adequate staffing for special education is for the legislature to provide adequate funding for special education. That's why I'm asking you to remove the limit on state special education funding for Oregon schools by supporting HB 2953.

I'd like to share a story about a student I worked with. Let's call my student Johnny. Soon after starting Kindergarten, Johnny began showing unsafe and disruptive behavior. He would yell, throw items off of his desk, and push other students. He would engage in these behaviors when he was asked to do work he didn't know how to do. He didn't yet have the skills to communicate with his teacher to ask for help.

When Johnny's behavior was out of control, his teacher would do a "room clear," which means she would move all the other students out into the hallway until Johnny was able to calm down with the help of an adult. Room clears happened at least once a week, sometimes more often than that.

I reached out to a Behavior Coach in my district to ask for help. I received a response explaining that our school team would need to try different approaches to supporting Johnny and to keep data for a minimum of six weeks before we could access help from a Behavior Coach. Six weeks felt like an extremely long time to wait when Johnny and his classroom were in crisis nearly every day.

Help finally did arrive about halfway through the school year. The presence of the Behavior Coach, who had the time and skills to work individually with Johnny every day for about four weeks, made all the difference.

Johnny should not have had to wait so long to get the help he needed to be a successful learner in his classroom.

Sadly, inadequate help for students with special needs is a reality in classrooms across the state. There is not enough help to go around. Our students with special needs suffer because of this lack of resources.

So what's the solution? It's pretty straight-forward. We simply must have more staff working in schools to meet the needs of our students with special needs. Many more hands on deck are necessary if we are to support our students to access their learning.

The only way for us to get the help our students need is for the legislature to give our districts the funding they need to hire more staff. You have an amazing opportunity with this bill to improve the lives of thousands of special needs students across Oregon. Thank you for your support!