

Testimony for February 17, 2025 Oregon Legislative Hearing on Special Education Funding

Good afternoon, Chair person and members of the committee. My name is Susan Merklin-Rotvik, and I am a special education classroom assistant working in a general education setting, supporting students with autism. I am here today to urge you to support increased funding for special education in Oregon.

Every day, I work alongside teachers and specialists to ensure that students with autism can learn, participate, and thrive in general education classrooms. This is not easy work. Many of my students struggle with communication, self-regulation, sensory processing, and social interactions. Without the right support, they risk being left behind—not because they lack intelligence or ability, but because they need specialized strategies, individualized attention, and a structured environment to succeed.

Let me share a quick story. One of my students, a third grader, started the 2022 school year struggling to stay in class for more than 10 minutes at a time. The noise, the transitions, and the unpredictability overwhelmed her. She would shut down, bolt from the classroom, or have meltdowns. But with consistent, dedicated support—helping her use a visual schedule, providing sensory breaks, and teaching self-advocacy strategies—she can now participate in full lessons, engage with peers, and complete her work. That progress didn't happen on its own. It required a trained, patient, and present support team.

Unfortunately, the reality is that many students don't get the level of support they need because special education is underfunded. In my school district, Lake Oswego, and in districts across Oregon, we are facing reductions in force due to budget shortfalls. Special education staff are being cut, and with fewer hands, fewer trained professionals, and fewer resources, we simply cannot maintain the level of support that has allowed so many of our students to succeed.

Without additional funding to hire and retain the educational staff necessary to support students with disabilities, we will not be able to continue providing the level of care, intervention, and inclusion that has made a difference in so many lives. The progress we've made—helping students communicate, learn, and participate meaningfully in their school communities—is at risk. General education teachers, already stretched thin, will have to do even more with even less, and students who need structured support will struggle without it.

Legislators, we need your help. We need sustainable funding to ensure that every student with disabilities receives the support they are legally entitled to—and that they deserve. When we invest in special education, we invest in inclusion, in opportunity, and in the future of every student in Oregon.

Please support this bill and give our students the chance to succeed. Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions.

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