

**Testimony in Support of HB 3129
House Committee on Higher Education and Workforce Development
February 25, 2025**

Chair Hudson, Vice Chairs Fragala and Harbick and members of the Committee,

My name is Ernie, and I am a student currently studying at the Ballmer Institute for Children's Behavioral Health at the University of Oregon. I am submitting this testimony in strong support of HB 3129, which I believe is an important step toward addressing the pressing shortage of behavioral health professionals in our state.

In August 2024, just before I began my journey with the Ballmer Institute, I lost my 9-year-old little sister. She had spent her life battling congenital heart disease, enduring five open-heart surgeries, dialysis, and countless hospital stays. But despite all of it, she remained the most joyful, resilient person I have ever known. She embraced life with a love so fierce that it carried her through every challenge, and she used positive psychology—often without realizing it—to find hope, connection, and meaning in the hardest moments.

Watching her navigate unimaginable pain with courage and an unshakable belief in the good around her changed me. It made me a better person. And ultimately, it made me choose this path. I joined the Ballmer Institute because I want to be part of a movement that helps children like my sister—children who face overwhelming medical and mental health challenges—build the strength, hope, and support they need to thrive.

Programs like the Ballmer Institute are essential because they focus on prevention, early intervention, and evidence-based practices to uplift children and families. Behavioral health support isn't just about managing crises; it's about empowering kids to believe in their own resilience, just as my sister did. If we can give children access to the right tools, safe spaces, and compassionate professionals, we can change lives.

My sister's story didn't end the way I hoped, but her impact continues. She is the reason I am here, and the reason I will dedicate my life to this work.

As a student who is preparing to join this workforce, I can say with certainty that the future of Oregon's behavioral health system depends on strong partnerships between the state, higher education institutions, and the communities we serve.

I strongly urge you to support HB 3129.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Ernie Leyva
Student, Ballmer Institute for Children's Behavioral Health
University of Oregon