

Thank you for the opportunity to share my position today. My name is Laurel Oliver-Gilmore, and I work district wide in Centennial School District as the Autism Consultant, and as the Student Services Consultant at two elementary and two middle schools. I also support most of the self-contained classrooms in our district, focusing on both life skills and behavior. I am writing in support of HB 2953, specifically the critical issue of funding for special education. This is an issue that affects not only the quality of education our students with disabilities receive, but also the well being of all of the teachers and support staff who work with them daily.

As special educators, we are entrusted with the responsibility of providing individualized, effective and meaningful education to students who have the highest and most complex needs in the district. While we know these students require and deserve the highest levels of support, the reality we are experiencing in our classrooms and in our buildings is that the unreasonably high number of students, and considerable lack of funding and resources, are preventing us from delivering the level of support our students need and deserve.

The idea behind special classes is to teach students lagging skills they need to return to their home school and be included in general education. That is rarely happening. We stuff our classes so full that staff frequently have to choose between keeping students safe and regulated, and providing instruction. The majority of students who enter a special class remain on that trajectory through high school and our post-secondary program. Most students in our special classes aren't even able to access mainstreaming in general education classes due to the high class sizes there and the ratio of students to staff. If the percentage cap was removed, our most vulnerable and high needs students would have access to the tools and staff they need in order to make progress and gain independence.

We talk about rightful presence, and co-creating space in our school buildings for every student, however staff aren't offered any time to collaborate, and certainly can't stack it on top of a teacher's already impossible job. Without adequate funding, everything we are attempting to provide to students becomes diluted, and we don't see the progress we should be able to expect for students receiving special education services.

As caseload numbers continue to rise, and the students coming into the district display more significant cognitive and behavioral needs, we have to admit that the burden on educators is unsustainable. Special education professionals are working overtime to compensate for the overwhelming numbers of students they are assigned to support. This leads to burnout, unhealthy levels of stress, and the eventual departure of dedicated staff members who simply can no longer do more with less.

Adequate funding is not just about the impact on workload; it is a way of ensuring that every student receives the high quality education and number of instructional minutes they are legally entitled to through their IEP. If districts continue to be underfunded, special educators cannot continue to do this impossible job, and our students are the ones who pay the price.

When I started with Centennial in 2011, my caseload of students with an autism eligibility was 82. The most recent caseload I received was 159 students with an autism eligibility. I have fewer resources now than I did when I started, and the students are significantly more complex. Our consultant team has been reduced consistently, due to lack of funding, and our workload has more than doubled. Gone are the days of observing students and putting together work systems or teaching staff strategies for support. It's all hands on deck. Over the last 3 years, I have covered 8 separate occurrences of unfilled special education positions, or long term leaves of absence for special education staff. These ranged from 2 months to 7 months each. In only one of those instances were my actual job duties changed and reduced as an accommodation. This means I was spending 50-60 additional hours a month, outside of my work day, trying to provide case management and instruction for students at the detriment of my family and my own children.

The bottom line is that our students deserve better. We, as educators, know what to do and what students need, but because our district lacks the funding to provide adequate resources, most time is spent putting out fires or trying to manage the chaos rather than providing meaningful instruction. We talk a lot about equity in Education. It's time to put that concept to work for our students. With the percentage cap removed, we can ensure that ALL students, regardless of their needs, receive the instruction, attention and resources they require to thrive. We know better. Now we must do better.

Respectfully,

Laurel Oliver-Gilmore