

To: House Revenue Committee
From: Dana Hepper, Children's Institute
Date: Thursday, March 13, 2025
Re: HB 2953 - Removes the special education weight cap in the State School Fund

Chair Nathanson, Vice Chairs Walters & Reschke, and members of the Committee,

My name is Dana Hepper, and I am the Director of Policy & Advocacy at the Children's Institute. As a part of that role, I am typically advocating for special education services for babies and preschoolers - the foundation of our special education system. I'm also the parent of a 14 year old daughter that receives special education services related to her learning disabilities. As a mom, I'm typically advocating for my child to receive the support she needs to succeed in school. Today, my personal and professional worlds collide, and I'm glad to testify in support of HB 2953.

First, I want to ground us in the inherent humanity of students with disabilities. I fear many of us may hold societal misconceptions that students with disabilities aren't worth investing in. I can tell you, as a mom, children with disabilities are amazing humans who contributed richly to our world - like every other child. My daughter has many learning disabilities. She learned to read after years of intensive tutoring, and now loves to read classic Jane Austin novels and historical fiction. We spend countless hours studying for algebra tests, only to come home with a C. and she spent last summer sewing replicas of 18th century gowns out of old bed sheets and curtains from thrift stores. Everyone of you probably can think of someone in your own life who has dyslexia, or ADHD, or an orthopedic impairment, or an intellectual disability, or autism who is a human with inherent value and who enriches your life and our communities. Maybe that person is even you. And tapping

into that incredible human potential is fostered by access to a quality, inclusive education, which is facilitated by HB 2953.

Yet children with disabilities often do not receive that quality education they need to reach their full potential. This is clear in graduation rates and test scores. Let's just take two indicators that are highly correlated with long-term outcomes.

- In the most recent state report card, 43% of all students met benchmark on the elementary reading assessment, while only 21% of students with disabilities did.
- 81% of all students graduated from high school in 4 years, 67% of students with disabilities met this critical life milestone.

This reality was reinforced by the AIR report presented to the Education Committees on February 26, which showed that our current funding for students receiving special education does not align with the costs of meeting the needs of students.

And it is clear from the stories and experiences from children and families who access special education services. These service gaps show up in special education services themselves - with overburdened special education teachers who have high caseloads, and under supported special education assistants. It also shows up in general ed classrooms, where class sizes above 35 students can make it a challenge for even the most skilled educator to differentiate learning to reach all students. This matters because students in special education can and should be educated together with peers without disabilities most of the time.

HB 2953 is a step toward addressing these gaps in services. However, it is not the only step. It is critically important that the legislature not just pass HB 2953 and allocate the needed resources to implement it. It is also important for the

legislature to monitor this investment to ensure that it is truly making the difference we need it to make for students in special education. We want you to have the Oregon Department of Education come back and demonstrate to you the tangible difference in special education resources (inputs), as was added with the -3 amendment in the policy committee. And ultimately we want you to expect better outcomes for students. Thank you.