

Testimony in Support of SB 5515

I am writing to submit testimony in support of SB 5515.

In 2018, my son, Hugo, began showing signs of dysregulation. At first, these signs were subtle—he suddenly disliked his favorite teachers and was kept after school to finish assignments. Eventually, he started experiencing panic attacks on the way to school. Though his school counselor was kind, she lacked the training to understand the neuroscience behind the interrelatedness of learning and emotional regulation. Her solution was to send us home and ask us to return when Hugo was "regulated."

Middle school was incredibly painful, compounded by the disruptions of COVID-19. By that time, Hugo had been diagnosed with profound anxiety, depression, ADHD, and a nonverbal learning disability. His intelligence ranked in the 97th percentile for his age, yet his processing speed was in the 9th percentile—a cognitive spread seen in fewer than 2% of the population. This kind of disparity presents unique challenges:

- **Processing delays** can make students like Hugo appear unresponsive or defiant when, in reality, they are struggling to keep up.
- **Executive functioning deficits** make it difficult to adapt to new information, often leading to perceived rigidity or oppositional behavior.
- **Missing key pieces of information** leads to feelings of fear, shame, and anxiety, which can result in shutdowns—often misinterpreted as defiance.
- **Difficulty focusing and completing work** can escalate into mood-related distress and mental health crises.

Hugo's middle school experience was not just unsupportive—it was harmful. His educators and the school administrators were quick to frustration, dismissive, and in some cases, emotionally abusive. By the time he reached high school, he was experiencing daily panic attacks and episodes of suicidal ideation.

Still, I recognize that Hugo's teachers were operating – in the wake of the pandemic – under increasing demands and with limited professional support. Though Portland Public Schools declared student mental health their top priority, teachers were given more responsibilities, larger class sizes, and fewer resources. They were overwhelmed, and as a result, students like Hugo suffered. I believe that if his teachers had received support, learning opportunities, and space to truly "see" him, he might not have endured the school-related trauma he did. Maybe he would have been able to imagine a way to learn. Maybe he wouldn't have felt like he was better off dead.

I have had to take it upon myself to learn how to support my son. I have studied books like Ross Greene's *Lost at School*, which helps teachers identify the underlying causes of student behavior, and Chan Hellman's *Hope Rising*, which demonstrates how educators can use the science of hope in the classroom. I've poured over Gabor Mate's *Scattered Minds* to gain insights into the biology and psychology of my child's brain; Peg Dawson's *Smart and Scattered* for support building actual strategies to help Hugo learn to enhance his natural abilities; and William Stixrud's *Self-Driven Child*, to explore how providing Hugo more control could alleviate his stress about learning. I

discovered the nonprofit *Neural Education*, which provides training on neuroscience, social-emotional learning, and resilience to help educators create inclusive learning environments where all students are seen, heard, and valued. These are resources that every educator should have access to. If Hugo's teachers had, his experience could have been drastically different.

Today, Hugo is a freshman at Grant High School. I believe his special education team has saved his life. They listen—to me and to him. They prioritize understanding. They are smart, thoughtful, kind, and honest. But they are also stretched thin. With proper funding, they could not only support Hugo's immediate needs but also empower him to advocate for himself, understand how he learns, and demonstrate his knowledge in ways that work for him.

Without sufficient funding, students like Hugo will continue to be left behind. The 17% of students receiving special education services deserve an education that is just as well-funded as their neurotypical peers. They deserve access to a free and equitable education.

I urge you to vote **YES** on SB 5515. A “no” vote not only ignores the need of all PPS students, but it dismisses the spirit of the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act, both of which prohibit discrimination based on disability—a discrimination I see playing out live each day that my son's SPED teachers are too overwhelmed with their caseloads to respond to me or Hugo. But, beyond the legal implications, a “no” vote sends a clear message that Oregon does not care about students like Hugo. And that is too devastating for me to accept.