

To Our Legislators,

My son is 4 years old and has Autism, Sensory Processing Disorder and Speech Delay. He has been in early intervention since he was 1.5 years old. Before landing at Clackamas Early Learning Center (CELC), we were kicked out of 2 private preschools because my sweet hearted boy was “too much to handle.” I cannot describe the anxiety I felt or the countless tears I shed every time I saw a call come in from his private preschool(s). I would have to pick him up early because the teachers and staff at those schools were not trained to teach him, and they didn’t have the correct teacher/student ratio. They couldn’t regulate him. They couldn’t reach him.

Every time I had to pick him up early, I would wonder when we would find our place in the world. Would anyone ever understand him? Would anyone take the time to really know him when he didn’t experience the world the same way as his neurotypical peers? Every time we were headed to his prior preschools and an administrator at school would call and tell us that there wasn’t enough staff to support him, we would have to explain to my son “we can’t go today.” And he would tell us “I want school,” as we were turning the car around. It was heartbreaking. Funding for EI/ECSE was crucial for helping our family feel like we were supported and belonged in community – something every human is entitled to.

Once he entered CELC, the teachers and staff there met him with curiosity, understanding and accommodation. For example, my son needs to move his body in order to regulate his nervous system. A regulated nervous system allows him to access his executive functioning (i.e. how we learn). CELC allows my son to stand at circle time and play with animal figurines (his special interest). They know that just because he isn’t looking at them, or *sitting* in circle, he is still listening. They took the time to learn about his special interests (animals and matching) and engage him in art, reading and peer interaction using his special interests as a tool. His private preschools did not have the trained staff for that – my son was overwhelming to them.

My son’s nervous system experiences the world and its stimuli in “hyperdrive.” His nervous system’s default mode is fight or flight. Normal day-to-day experiences, such as an unexpected noise or light touch from a peer, transitions from eating snack to play time, needing to use the bathroom – can all easily dysregulate him and send him into a fight or flight response. He needs trained support staff that understand this and can leverage their experience, education and tools to help him regulate. Some of these tools are visual schedules, extra time between transitions, scheduled bathroom visits, noise canceling headphones, etc. These are all things that teachers in a private preschool classroom do not have the time to implement. They are simply too busy and not trained in these strategies.

Another tool that my son has routinely used at CELC is an Augmentative Alternative Communication device (AAC). He uses some verbal words and phrases to communicate but is not yet conversational. Since entering CELC, he has access to using an AAC with staff trained on how to teach him how it works. This has decreased his dysregulation by enhancing his ability to communicate his needs/preferences. Again, this lets him access his executive functioning in order to actually learn at school.

The trained educators, speech pathologists, and occupational therapists he has access to at CELC use tools such as the AAC to help my son feel safe and understood in a world that is not meant to make him feel safe and understood. His language has grown leaps and bounds since he started school at CELC. He loves school. He looks forward to it every day. He craves acceptance and love just like the rest of us. I ask you, please fund these programs and amend SB 5515 to allocate \$432.8 million for EI/ECSE. It is imperative that at this early age, our children with special needs, feel safe and supported. It is imperative that they have a positive association with school and early childhood special education so that they can go on and be successful in other school settings. This lays the groundwork for their social and educational future. This resource is priceless to families like ours. Thank you for listening to this written testimony.