

RE: SB 5155 FUNDING FOR REGIONAL INCLUSIVE SERVICES

Co-Chair Sollman, Co-Chair Ruiz, and members of the Joint Subcommittee on Education,

My name is Brad Hendershott. I'm a speech-language pathologist and licensed autism specialist with over 25 years of experience serving children with complex physical, behavioral, and communication needs. I supervise services for students with autism, orthopedic impairments, and traumatic brain injuries at Columbia Regional Inclusive Services.

*I'm here to speak on behalf of Oregon's children who are blind, deaf, or living with the most severe forms of autism, brain injury, or physical disability—and to urge the legislature to adequately fund the specialized instruction and support provided by Regional Inclusive Services, so these students can be successfully included in their neighborhood schools and build the skills to make the best of their lives. I can think of no better way to make that case than by sharing the stories of the students themselves.*

Jason is a middle schooler who survived a devastating car crash. After months of rehabilitation, he was scheduled to return to school—now using a power wheelchair, unable to speak, and limited use of his hands. Regional Inclusive Services staff came alongside the school to support Jason's re-entry. An augmentative communication specialist provided Jason with a speech generating device so that he had a way to communicate at school, and trained staff on how to use the device. An assistive technology specialist figured out how to mount adaptive switches to Jason's wheelchair so that he could access a computer independently. Today, Jason is learning alongside classmates at his neighborhood school—with friends he can talk to, assignments he can complete, and a future he can reach.

Ethan is a third grader with autism who has very limited speech. School had become an increasingly frustrating and confusing place for Ethan, leading to severe episodes of aggression and elopement out of the building. In desperation, Ethan's parents agreed to a reduced school day. He was attending school just one hour per day, twice per week. The district sought to place Ethan in a special day school outside of the district. Regional Inclusive Services was asked to help as well. An autism specialist and behavior analyst coached the school team of prevention strategies, and redirected efforts with Ethan toward building trust and rapport. Then Ethan was gradually and explicitly taught essential skills; how to communicate his wants and needs, how to cope with frustration, and how to participate in teacher-directed activities. Ethan was so responsive to this approach that soon he was back into his third grade classroom full time, making new friends with classmates and was achieving academically at grade level. The district discontinued efforts to change Ethan's placement.

Minh was twelve when he arrived from Vietnam where he had been treated for a brain tumor. The surgeons saved his life and removed the tumor, but the procedure cost Minh his vision, he was blind. He also spoke no English. The middle school was nervous, unsure how to support Minh. Then Regional Inclusive Services assigned a teacher of the blind and low vision who would work with Minh to teach him Braille, and collaborate with teachers to ensure Minh had alternative ways to access print and visual materials. An orientation and mobility specialist taught Minh how to use a cane to safely and independently navigate the school and community. Minh thrived—and those services were pivotal to his successful adjustment.

There are hundreds of these stories of children from across the state. *I want to emphasize—these are services for children who are blind, deaf, living with the most severe forms of autism, brain injury, or physical disabilities. In other words, our most vulnerable.* The legislature created Regional Inclusive Services in the 1980s to provide critical services for children that school districts cannot adequately serve on their own—now we're at an inflection point and that system is in jeopardy. For over fifteen years, per-student funding has steadily declined. If Regional Inclusive Services are funded at the level proposed in SB 5515, cuts to staff and services for children like Jason, Ethan, and Minh are inevitable. We respectfully urge members of this Joint Subcommittee to strengthen funding for educational services that are essential for children with low incidence disabilities—and prevent the cuts and service reductions that are otherwise certain to follow.

Thank you for your consideration.

Brad Hendershott