



Debra Koutnik, MD (she/her)

***Debra L. Koutnik, M.D.***  
***Behavioral Pediatric Physician***  
**SOUTHERN OREGON**  
**BEHAVIOR SPECIALISTS**  
**Ashland, OR 97520**  
e-mail: [drdebk@sobehaviorspecialists.net](mailto:drdebk@sobehaviorspecialists.net)

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Phone: 541-625-9044

Fax: 541-314-9490

DATE: March 28, 2025

TO: Co-Chairs Senator Sollman and Representative Ruiz  
and Members of the Joint Committee on Education

FROM: Debra Koutnik, MD, FAAP, Behavioral Pediatric Physician

SUBJECT: Testimony in Support of HB 5515: Increasing School Funding for Regional Inclusive Services

My name is Debra Koutnik, MD and I am submitting this testimony to request an increase in funding for Regional Inclusive Services.

I am a Pediatrician from southern Oregon who has specialized for the past 25 years in the care of children and youth (age 0-22 yrs) with mental health, behavioral, and neurodevelopmental challenges and have therefore worked closely with the multiple school districts in our region which range in size from 8 students to 13,750 who support my patients with Down's Syndrome, severe Traumatic Brain Injuries, Cerebral Palsy, profound Autism, blind children, deaf children, survivors of extreme premature birth, and those with complex genetic conditions.

Regional Inclusive Services (RIS) support our children with the most complex educational and healthcare needs in the school setting. They are especially essential in rural areas like here in southern Oregon where small, isolated school districts cannot possible provide the specialized services required to provide these students with the free and appropriate education to which they are entitled.

Regional Programs are meant to provide equitable services in rural areas where individual school districts would not have the resources to hire and retain teachers, OTs, SLPs, and other specialists with the complex training needed to provide these specialized educational services.

It allows more cost effective purchasing of specialized mobility equipment for students that allows them full participation in their school community that can then be utilized for other students in the region later as the child grows.

The Regional Programs provide essential high quality professional education for all the school district staff in their region and Regional Programs in even larger areas, like Portland, provide educational training programs throughout the state.

There is no question that Oregon's Regional Inclusive Services program has been well designed to meet the needs of a state like ours that is geographically large with multiple rural and frontier districts while still providing high quality supports for its students and allow them to thrive and be integrated members of their home communities.

Unfortunately, the funding of our Regional Inclusive Services Program has not kept up with the growth demands place on it and the per student funding amount has dropped significantly over time.

The educational staff supporting our children with the highest support needs are continually asked to do more with less. And while they have done a heroic job, it is unfair to our students, families, and staff to expect them continue in this highly stressful situation. We know that teacher turnover is at an all time high. And while working with students with special support needs is certainly a labor of love, it is also very demanding. The least we can do is provide the funding for our educational staff with the most demanding jobs, who provide the most specialized and loving care for our students with the highest support needs, adequate funding to do that very demanding job rather than make it that much harder.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Debra Koutnik, MD". The signature is written in a cursive style with a loop at the end of the last name.

Debra Koutnik, MD