

Written Testimony for HB 2673

As coordinator and professor in the Southern Oregon University Special Education Programs, I am writing to express my concern related to the proposed HB 2673. Specifically, the condition to change the number of days a school district has to complete an initial evaluation or re-evaluation from 60 school days to 60 calendar days.

Reducing the number of days special educators have to evaluate students for special education services addresses only the symptoms of the issue. It is true students who receive special education services have a low graduation rate, experience chronic absenteeism, and are likely to drop out. Parents are legitimately concerned about their children. Placing them in special education a few days earlier than we do now is unlikely to have a significant effect on these concerns.

Currently we have a severe shortage of special educators. The number of special educators retiring, leaving the profession due to burn out, and increased number of students receiving services is disproportionate to the number of replacement teachers being trained. This will continue to be the trend if we place additional burdens on teachers to rush through the evaluation process. The number of preservice teachers we have will continue to drop as the demands of the profession increase. In our area it is not uncommon for special educators to have 40 to 60 students on their caseload. The amount of time special educators have to work directly with students is dwindling. Adding an unreasonable constraint on the evaluation process will significantly impact the time teachers work with students.

A more systemic approach would be to train all teachers to work with students with special needs. Recently it was mandated teachers become culturally competent to address the needs of second language learners. ELL students deserve to receive instruction that meets their needs. A report from 2011-2012 indicated there are 63,790 ELL students in Oregon public schools. In the ODE 2012-2013 census, 72,598 students were served by special education. Shouldn't students who receive special education services be afforded the same consideration?

The Oregon Administrative Rules requires preservice teachers in special education training programs be familiar with general education curriculum and have practical experiences in general education settings. A similar requirement of general education teachers regarding knowledge and experience in special education does not exist. Too often students with special needs are excluded - physically, emotionally and socially - from their typical peers. In large part this is due to lack of skills, understanding and support for general educators to work with, and promote acceptance of diverse learners. Unfortunately, the attitude of "those are your students" continues to this day. Rather than reducing the evaluation time, why not have general educators skilled in working with students before they are referred for special education services, and increase opportunities for students with special needs to remain in the general classroom with their peers?

To address the concerns you raise I suggest legislation targeting reform of teacher training; and increase funding for schools to reduce class size, provide early intervention, and strengthening the collaboration between PK-12, community agencies and employers, and higher education. Adding to the already overwhelming workload of special educators will not address the issues. In all likelihood it will have the reverse effect by limiting the time special educators have to work directly with students and their general education colleagues; and in the long term increase the number of special educators leaving the profession and decrease the number of those entering.

While I support addressing the issues of students with special needs in public schools, I believe SB 560 is not the solution.

Sincerely

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