



PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS
DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

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Mary Pearson- Director

Feb. 18th 2015

For House Education Committee Hearing on February 20, 2015

RE: HB 2597

Dear Chair Doherty and Members of the House Education Committee:

My name is Mary Pearson and I am the Special Education Director for Portland Public Schools (PPS). PPS serves about 48,500 students, including about 6,500 students with disabilities. We take our responsibilities toward our students and families seriously. We are focused not only on compliance but on improving educational outcomes for our students. We strongly believe there is one system of education, and special education needs to function within and support that system.

PPS, like all public school districts in Oregon, and the country, has an affirmative obligation to identify, locate and evaluate children who are suspected of having a disability. Nationwide, 13% of the school populations are identified as having a disability for special education purposes. Oregon, and PPS, are at 14%, well above Oregon's 11% cap for special education funding. This data does not suggest that we are under identifying students with disabilities in Oregon.

For the 13-14 school year, PPS had 2,011 students with severe absences (less than 85%) and 5,194 students with chronic absences (85 – 89%). PPS data shows racial/ethnic disparities in attendance as follows (average attendance rate for 12-13 school year): Native American students – 84% attendance; Black students – 86% attendance; Hispanic students – 86% attendance; Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander – 86% attendance; White students – 91% attendance. Treating attendance issues as an automatic reason for a special education evaluation will only exacerbate already disproportionate identification in special education.

In addition, HB 2597 assumes that truancy (or unexcused absence) is, by itself, a reason to suspect disability, and requires school districts to conduct special education evaluations for the sole reason that a student is truant or has unexcused absences. We agree that absenteeism contributes significantly to lack of academic achievement but a pipeline into special education is not the answer. Attendance is only one factor that a team should look at to determine whether a special education evaluation is needed. The impact of HB 2597 would potentially double or triple the number of special education evaluations completed in a school year. It costs an average of about \$2,000 to complete a

special education evaluation. Completing an additional 2,000 evaluations (based on number of students with severe absences) would cost PPS 4 million dollars.

Last, HB 2597 violates federal law by assigning team-based decisions to the district's special education director. Not only PPS but the state of Oregon would risk loss of all federal special education funds by adopting this measure.

PPS recognizes that truancy is a significant problem, but it is a general education problem that requires a general education solution. The Oregon Legislature could move this issue toward resolution by convening a work group to look at what other states do to comprehensively address the truancy issue. Washington State has had a law in place for years (see, e.g. <http://www.k12.wa.us/GATE/Truancy/>) and it would be worth studying the effect of that law (and others) before taking a measure such as this that would lead to such unintended consequences. It would be important to find out which states have successfully moved toward closing the attendance gap without increasing disproportionality in special education.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mary Pearson", written in black ink.

Mary Pearson
Special Education Director