

5/14/2015

Dear Senate Committee on Education:

My name is Christie Riehl and I am a parent of a 17 year old daughter who has a diagnosis of autism, intellectual disability and a rare phenotype of severe self-injurious behavior. I also have a 13 year old son identified as talented and gifted. My daughter has been admitted twice to the Inpatient Neurobehavioral Unit at Kennedy Krieger/Johns Hopkins for treatment of her severe self-injury. She is still in the hospital because the highly successful medical and behavior treatment that is available to her in Baltimore is not available in Oregon.

However, I'm here not to just advocate for my daughter, but for many other students in Oregon who have high cost disabilities and can benefit from the proposed increase to the High Cost Disabilities Fund as part of this bill.

I have been told by a school district special education administrator that there is currently no incentive for school districts to work cooperatively with parents on behalf of students who have high cost disabilities. This is purely because school districts know that they will take a financial hit by accommodating some of the costly needs of these students. This makes for expensive legal fees for school districts. I think it would be telling to know what school districts spend on legal costs related to special education students.

The end result is that the vast majority of parents, foster parents and guardians are overwhelmed with the conflict and expense involved in getting their children what they need and often give up because they cannot afford an attorney to help them. Yes, Disability Rights Oregon has free legal help available and they do a fantastic job with the resources that they have, but they don't have the staff or resources to even begin to help all those in need. These vulnerable children are the ones to suffer from this highly contentious process. I implore you to move toward a process that moves away from litigation by starting with increasing money allocated to the High Cost Disabilities Fund.

Ironically, it is actually the most vulnerable of children who have disabilities that are most effected by the current legal and financial structure in Oregon, even with the High Cost Disabilities Fund. Children like my daughter, unless they are in a pediatric nursing facility, represent some of the highest costs to individual school districts. Without some kind of legislative change that addresses the needs of students who represent significantly higher costs than \$30,000 per year to school districts, there is even higher financial motivation for school districts to litigate these cases.

In our case, we have done months of work trying to incentivize cooperation with both the Oregon Department of Education and local school district by bringing shared funding to the table to reduce the costs of providing the necessary resources to allow our daughter to access her right to education - all to no avail. Not only has there been no real action to cooperate but our openness with our daughters' situation resulted in our local school district refusing to even enroll our daughter despite a clear Oregon Revised Statute requiring them to do so. This means that they are paying an attorney to fight our case and we will have to do the same.

In closing, please consider the multiple benefits of increasing the High Costs Disabilities Fund via HB 2927. Not only will it help school district budgets through more reimbursement for students with high cost disabilities but it will also hopefully decrease the districts' legal costs associated with the financial

motivation to immediately move to involve attorneys in cases for some of our most vulnerable children in Oregon.

Perhaps more importantly, it will hopefully help families be able to focus on the many other needs of their highly vulnerable children. Also, of course, I would hope that action would be taken, in this legislative session, to further incentivize school districts to work cooperatively to meet the needs of students with particularly high cost disabilities due to unique medical and behavioral challenges. After all, research shows that a strong early investment in students with disabilities means that they can develop skills that will result in more independence and therefore less cost to the state over the rest of their adult lifetimes.

Thank you,

Christie Riehl
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