

Statement of Support for HB 4022
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I have been the administrator for Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education [EI/ECSE] program since the 2004 - 2005 school year and began supervising the K-12 Speech Language Pathologists [SLPs] in 2005-2006. I am a former SLP who spent 18 years in Lincoln County as a K-12 SLP before becoming an administrator at South Coast Education Service District [SCESD]. I can attest to the fact that finding SLPs on the Central and Southern Oregon Coast has been a challenge for the past 15 years or more. While working in Lincoln County, I experienced the expansion of my SLP assignment from one school, to two schools and finally to four schools and a final caseload of 85+ students, as the district came up short on candidates willing to relocate to the coast.

Once I arrived at SCESD, I learned first-hand how challenging it was for an administrator to hire and keep SLPs. Over the years the total SCESD SLP staff dropped from a high of [18] SLPs in 2006 - 2007 to the current [12] SLPs in 2015-2016. In that time, we have lost staff to retirement and relocation in and out of the state. We recently lost a new hire to two component school districts who went together to create their of K-12 speech program. Although we are fortunate to have [12] highly trained SLPs remaining, they do not all work full time, leaving us stretched thin in some settings. We have been fortunate to add [6] Speech Language Pathologists [SLPAs] to our staff in the last few years. But, while SLPAs are supportive of the day-to-day requirements of the EI/ECSE and K-12 programs, they are an inadequate substitute for an SLP. This is due to their limited training, SLP supervision requirements and restrictions on what an SLPA is allowed to do under their license.

Over the years, I have attended job fairs in Portland and Eugene, only to be told by candidates that they were not interested in interviewing for a position on the Oregon Coast. While there are now three programs training SLPs in the state, there continues to be a shortage of available SLP candidates as new graduates prefer to work in larger metropolitan areas, move out of state or go to work in a clinical setting. At one time we were able to cobble together additional services by hiring bits and pieces of one local SLP who left the field to raise her children and another who was retired and willing to come back in a limited capacity. The SCESD sponsored a candidate in the first cohort of students in the ODE partnership with the Nova Southeastern Communication Disorders program. That program turned out to be far more expensive than anticipated and the ODE stipend was inadequate to cover more than 25% of the overall costs of the program. Once done with the program, the SLP completed a two year obligation to the SCESD and left.

SCESD is not the only one in this area suffering from the shortage of SLPs. While one local district addressed the shortage by spreading existing SLPs across more assignments and adding an SLPA, another ended up going one full year with no SLP. For one full year the district used their Special Education Director, as licensed SLP, as the case manager for some children but services were limited. They contracted with SCESD the following year to provide SLP services and to assist the district with developing a compensatory plan. Fortunately, SCESD was able to provide an SLP for that one year but not the next, when we had to contract with an agency to provide a traveling SLP to complete the assignment. The next year the district was fortunate to recruit two SLPs, one with family ties in the area, who needed to complete their Clinical Fellowship Year and signed on with the district for an extended period of time.

Every year we wonder if this is the year we will not be able to meet the requirements of the EI/ECSE and K-12 speech programs. So far we have managed...but just barely. PERS retirees have been an essential component of our service plan for a number of years. Through my tenure as administrator of the programs, we have had at least [6] PERs retirees providing services to our kids. Of the [3] current PERs retirees, one is working full time, one is working less than full time (although the position requires a full time SLP) and the third retiree works part time. Donna Woods, a PERS retiree who will be directly affected by the PERs restrictions, went from being a part time SLP [.6 FTE] to a full time SLP [1.0 FTE] as the SCESD became less and less able to support one of our largest component districts and the ECSE program. As it is, she is serving both programs, with the assistance of an SLPA, spreading her much too thin with a combined caseload of more than [80] students. At this time, we need her services full time for the ECSE program and an additional K-12 SLP to meet the needs of the district.

It is no small task to convince someone to come live on the coast. While the scenery is beautiful, we lack many of the social and cultural activities that are appealing to younger SLPs, especially those that are single. In addition, we lack the amenities that can be found in a larger area. The South Coast also poses employment challenges for married SLPs who may be offered a job with the SCESD while the partner cannot find employment in the area. We lost two very interested candidates one year ago for this exact reason. We may still lose our newest SLPA due to lack of employment opportunities for her spouse. In the last three years we have been able to fill [2] SLP openings with people who either had a retirement home here in Coos County or wanted to move to Coos County because the spouse was retired and this is where they wanted to live. These are the exceptions not the rule.

We are now planning for the 2016- 2017 school year and I once again find myself posting positions here on the coast, hoping for another miracle. The candidate pool has not gotten bigger, in fact it has become smaller. Two years ago I had [7] candidates that I was corresponding with about our openings. From that pool, I was able to hire [1] SLP. Last year there were only [3] candidates for the K-12 SLP opening. I was able to hire [2] of the candidates because one had worked for us and had to leave for a year to take care of family and one was moving to Coos Bay following her husband's retirement.

The potential loss of [1] more full time SLP, because the PERs exception expired, would leave this agency with a gaping hole that we probably will not be able to fill. To put this all in perspective, since 2004-2005, the SCESD has had a total of [33] full/part time SLPs working in one or more of our programs. Of the [21] that we no longer employ...only [5] retired from the SCESD and only [1] of those continues to work as an SLP at SCESD. We currently employ [12] full/part time SLPs in one or more programs. Of those [12]; [3] are PERS retirees, only [1] of whom retired at full retirement age, leaving [2] working restricted hours. Of the remaining [9] SLPs, [4] are near PERs retirement, [3] are in the middle of their careers and [1] is just getting started.

Thinking of the future, I am encouraging my SLPAs that have an undergraduate degree in Communication Disorders to consider applying to graduate program. That raises a different issue, while the goal is to grow our own SLPs, once a candidate is accepted to a site-based graduate program we lose them for a minimum of [2] years and potentially they will never return to the Oregon Coast as a full blown SLP!

If you would like to any other information please feel free to email or call.

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