

To: Oregon House Committee on Education
From: Haylee Williams
Date: February 3, 2016
Re: Support for Oregon House Bill 4031

It was right in the middle of my high school career when my mom received the news: she'd been laid off. This was the last thing she wanted to hear as a single parent who was supporting herself and her only daughter. No relatives were there to help. It was just the two of us to fend for ourselves.

We weren't unlike hundreds of thousands of Americans going through the same thing. We were just one more family, one more unit, one more statistic. And so it was. My mother decided to apply herself. She received a scholarship at a local university – under the condition that she remained a full-time student. How is one expected to work odd jobs, pay the bills, raise a high schooler, and be a full-time college student? To this day, I wonder how she accomplished all of that.

The worst thing about dipping below the poverty line is how it feels. Not, "oh, I can't get those new Nike's" or "darn, I wish we had the money to go prom dress shopping". It was none of that. What flooded my thoughts and consumed me was a sense of hopelessness. It was like standing in front your home watching as every brick, wall, and window crumbles right before your eyes - until all that's left is dust. Worthless.

That's not to say that before my mother got laid off we were well off. We started off just all right. All of our basic essentials were taken care of. But then the cutbacks happened so fast, each one stripping away little freedoms. The hardest adjustments came when we had to limit how far into town we drove because gas was too pricey, or when we couldn't afford to have internet at the house anymore. This really impacted my school and homework assignments.

While I was enduring this struggle, I experienced a decline. A decline in my grades, a decline in my willingness to participate, a decline in my enthusiasm to be a part of the present moment because I was stuck in a space where everything was collapsing at hyper speed at home. While the regular world moved at a comfortable pace, for the first time ever my grades plummeted. Gone forever were the days of my 4.0 GPA.

Throughout this experience, three teachers reached out to me: Mrs. Duncan, Mrs. Baker, and Mrs. Montgomery. It was they who noticed when I began to stumble academically. They approached me with kindness, telling me not, "You've missed so much class. Make sure to get notes from your peers. You have a test in three days' time". No, instead they asked, "Haylee, are you ok? You seem stressed and we've missed having you in class".

It blew my mind that someone had noticed! They noticed that I was having a hard time managing my stress even before I realized how much our situation at home was impacting my school-life. Having always been a strong student, it was hard for me to approach my teachers and I admit

that I needed help – not because I hated school or their class – but because things were so hard at home.

My mom did all she could to reduce my worry, but the reality was we were struggling. This was made even harder by the fact we only saw each other a small fraction of the day. I knew it was just the two of us, and I felt as though it wouldn't ever get better.

Looking back, there are many things I wish I could change about the way I responded to our situation. I wish I had known that the hard times wouldn't last forever or that I could still make it and be a good student. But what I wouldn't change is the wonderful teachers I had. They were the ones who stayed after class to help me catch up, who provided extra study tips, and who reminded me of the student I could be. They were the ones who prevented me from giving up before it was too late. And they were the ones who helped me become the leader that I am.

I urge you to support House Bill 4031 because without Mrs. Duncan, Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Montgomery I may not have received the help that I needed in time. The truth is: what happens outside of the classroom is carried on the shoulders of the student inside it. I want other students to get the help that I did. Helping school staff and teachers better understand the effects of trauma can make all the difference in their students' lives.

Sincerely,
Haylee Williams