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April 2, 2017

To the House Committee on Education:

I am writing today to advocate for HB 3263, which seeks to review the workload and associated implications of school-based occupational therapists in Oregon.

I attended the University of Oregon for my undergraduate work and recently graduated from Pacific University with my doctorate in occupational therapy. For my first job, I was hired as an occupational therapist in the Oregon City School District. Having completed my final capstone project at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility, I was particularly motivated to examine the school-to-prison pipeline, which I firmly believe stands as a civil rights issue in Oregon. And what better place to stop that well-worn track than in a kindergarten classroom?

Occupational therapists are well suited to address a claim brought on by the U.S. Department of Education. They shared that students with disabilities are “more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (13%) than students without disabilities (6%)” (2014). This is unacceptable, and six months ago, I thought that I would be able to make a dent in this issue by taking on a caseload of children with primarily behavioral and emotional eligibilities.

But in Oregon City, as with many districts in this state, occupational therapists work on a consultative model, and making that dent is just not a reality. A child with a profound learning disability gets 90 minutes of occupational therapy services per year. That’s 10 minutes a month. A child with severe and persistent mental health challenges has 120 minutes a year of “check-in” time with me. Most every day, I consider it to be an ethical pitfall. I ask myself constantly, *Am I really making a difference for these children?* It’s a hard question for any practitioner to face, but it has taken an especially hard toll on me as a new professional. My job is to develop individual plans so that students can, and do, succeed. How can I possibly do that in 10 minutes a month and feel good about my work?

Tomorrow I return from spring break with 79 children on my caseload. I am in the initial evaluation process for seven others. I cover eight schools, some of which are out-of-district placements for children with behavioral and mental health needs that our district cannot provide services for (Hint: That’s 6+ hours of time in the car each week, almost a full day that I wish I could be spending with students.) I see children 5-18 years old. I evaluate, observe, treat, and report on each of these kids, and supervise two occupational therapy assistants. I believe that I spend 40% of my week outside of the classroom; managing emails, writing reports, and squeezing in time to collaborate with my colleagues when I can. I average 5-10 hours a week of work at home.

Children in Oregon deserve more, and they deserve better. Solidifying workload limits for occupational therapy practitioners is an important step in ensuring that students are provided the services that they need to meet their educational goals. School should be a place where all children can succeed, and I do believe that particularly for students with needs addressed by occupational therapy practitioners, we are not doing our best to ensure that they can.

Sincerely,

  
Sara Pilorget, OTD, OTR/L