

Julia Damon OTR/L
Support for HB 3263 regarding School-Based OT
March, 31st 2017

Dear House Committee on Education,

I am writing this letter in support of HB3263. The issue of workload guidelines for school-based occupational therapy (OT) has played a multifaceted role in my career. Before becoming an occupational therapist, I received a Masters of Art in Teaching (MAT) in Secondary School Art Education, and an Oregon Initial I Teaching Certificate. From 2010 to 2012, I worked as a one-on-one instructional assistant for a 3rd grade student with a traumatic brain injury. Though this student had significant delays in fine motor function, which had a clear impact on his education, he did not receive OT as a direct service. Instead, he received OT as support to school personnel. His hand writing and ability to complete table top projects were so impacted, yet he never got to work with the OT directly. She provided me with consult, but at this point I did not have the skills or background to address his motor delays. Her feedback, did help address his social needs, however, yet I only saw her once during the entire time that I worked with him. When we did meet, her advice was extremely valuable. She encouraged me to set up more peer learning opportunities for him, with table mates and 'lunch buddies'.

Advising me on activities to increase social participation definitely helped his ability to seek help from others and participate with peers. Unfortunately, this did not meet his needs for skilled fine motor intervention on a regular basis. As a result, his ability to write and tool use classroom tools barely advanced, and his family decided that his needs would be better met in another state. After following up with both his family and his former OT, I learned that he had moved to California where he was receiving adequate school services, and that his former school OT had left her position in Lane County due to feeling burnt out.

Despite learning about the troubles of being a school-based OT in Oregon, I still wanted to pursue it as a career. I knew that OT's worked in a variety of settings with people of all ages. I also knew that it was a holistic and client-centered practice that helped populations impacted by illness or injury improve independence, health and quality of life through engagement in meaningful activities. I looked to the Bureau of Labor Statistics to confirm my career decision. There, I discovered that the national job outlook was growing by 27% (much faster than average) and that the median pay was \$80,150 per year. I already had a strong background in education and human development from my MAT, yet added much more to my skill set in my OT program at Pacific University. Here I gained clinical training in neurology, kinesiology, physical disability, and mental health. I knew that I could become an OT in any setting. I chose, however, to design my education towards becoming an OT in the public education system because it is where I felt that I could make the most valuable impact. This was a

choice I made despite the fact that school-based employment offers the lowest median pay (\$69,460) when compared to OTs working in hospitals, skilled nursing, home health and private practice. I chose school-based OT because I believe that Public Education is the backbone of American society, and that if I could help children with severe delays to succeed at a rate similar to their typical peers that I would be doing a service to them and to my country by allowing them to seamlessly enter into the community and the workforce as valuable citizens.

I was hesitant, however, to work in Oregon. Knowing the workload troubles that the OT from Lane County had faced, I decided to look outside of Oregon for a field-work placement. I did my clinical internship at Evergreen Public Schools (EGPS) in Vancouver, WA, where I am now employed. Living in Oregon and working in Washington requires me to pay Oregon income taxes. These are quite high, but the benefits of working for a district with reasonable workload guidelines and living in my state of choice are worth it.

I share this sentiment with many colleagues. Several of the therapist who I work with at EGPS also live in Oregon. We are all happy with our working conditions and the attention that we are able to give to each individual student on our caseloads. All of us are thankful for our positions and plan to stay in the district indefinitely. None of us are required to serve more than 50 students, and that allows us to feel like we can do our job well. This sentiment is quite different from other OTs I know who are serving anywhere from 80 to 100 students in Oregon. Working on the OTA legislative committee I have gotten to know many of them and hear many of their stories. They report feeling burned out, unsupported, ineffective and ready to move on to another job in the near future. Many of them are forced to only support students through consultation, seeing them only about two times per year. If they determine that a student is severely delayed, and needs regular skilled therapy for motor development, the most they can see them is bi-weekly.

My caseload allows me to see students for direct service on a weekly basis. I also have time to build rapport with them and all of the stakeholders in their education. I help my district screen children for early delays, do in-depth evaluations for fine motor and sensory processing dysfunction, and review medical histories and test results to make appropriate placement and service recommendations on their Individualized Education Programs (IEPS). I also attend and contribute to weekly team meetings at the elementary school I work at, that focus on children identified as at-risk of poor school performance.

I create and supply adaptive equipment such as: writing easels, pencil grips, seat inserts, wheel chair trays, weighted vests, picture schedules and modified feeding equipment. I train teachers and staff in effective methods for communicating, educating and meeting the needs of children who have autism and/or emotional-regulation challenges. I work with the transition programs to prepare students for life after school including (i.e. independent living, work, and higher education). Overall, because of my workload guidelines, I am able to provide customized, quality care to each student I work with. Along with the positive effect that my work has on individual students and caregivers, the efficiency of my work has also benefited the district financially. Among other things, the time I spend providing direct service allows me to progress students to the point of discharge. Also, my time spent creating, modifying and repairing adaptive

equipment saves the district a great deal in annual costs that would otherwise be required to buy new equipment.

This year I joined the OTA/O legislative committee specifically to help with this bill. I receive no monetary compensation for this job, yet feel it is a worthwhile position for its intrinsic value. I have heard so many stories from Oregon School-Based OT's about the practical, emotional and ethical troubles they face working in Oregon's Public Schools. I hope that my efforts on the OTA/O legislative committee and that my personal testimony can bring them one step closer to having the quality working conditions and meaningful opportunities that I have at EPGS in WA state. I hope as well, that my efforts can help the State of Oregon to develop outstanding workload guidelines for school-based therapists that set a high national precedence, improve statewide GPA's and drop-out rates, and encourages a greater influx of quality OT practitioners into our local public schools, community and workforce.

Sincerely,

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