

June 2, 2020

TO: Senator Rob Wagner, Chair Senate Committee on Education  
FR: Heather Olivier, FACT Oregon, Member of State Advisory Council on Special Education, Member of Dispute Resolution Committee  
RE: Informational Hearing

My name is Heather Olivier, and I am a Program Coordinator at FACT Oregon. FACT Oregon is the Parent Training and Information Center for the state of Oregon. As the PTI, we work with families and youth with disabilities, help parents participate effectively in their children's education and development and partner with professionals and policy makers to improve outcomes for all children with disabilities. Our mission is to empower Oregon families experiencing disability in their pursuit of a whole life by expanding awareness, growing community, and equipping families.

During distance learning we have seen some districts and schools become innovative and creative in responding to the needs of families and students. They have responded as community hubs by partnering with community partners to provide resources and supports to families in need. Unfortunately, that is not the case in all of Oregon. We have also seen Oregon's most vulnerable children and communities bearing the brunt of the pandemic. Historically underserved communities are more likely to face barriers to accessing distance learning.

## **Nationally**

A recent report from NPR cited a national survey from ParentsTogether, an advocacy group. The survey found troubling information from families whose children are accessing special education services. One in five report that they are receiving the services included in their IEP. 35% report that their children are doing little to no remote learning, compared with 17% for students not accessing special education services. Finally, 40 % of families with children accessing special education services expressed concern about their child's mental health.

## **Survey Results**

In mid-May, FACT Oregon sent out a survey to families and professionals asking questions about their experience during distance learning. The information that we

received along with calls to our support line allowed us to identify some trends that families have experienced during this time. The information that I am sharing includes information from families that are accessing Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education as well as families accessing school age services.

Families indicated multiple barriers towards participating in distance learning. The social and emotional well-being of families and children were one of the biggest barriers identified in the survey. Extensive research indicates that when an individual's social and emotional well-being are not being supported, the ability to participate in academic growth is limited.

Additionally, educators and families indicated that a large barrier exists for families that are needing access to basic needs such as housing, loss of income, food insecurity etc. These needs were more pressing than distance learning.

Frequently, distance learning has been provided in an online model. An additional barrier that families have reported is around limited or no access to technology.

Families that are working outside the home find themselves in a position of trying to figure out how to be employed and be responsible to implement their child's distant learning plan. Additionally, families that are working from home also indicated barriers towards supporting their child's distance learning plan.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act calls out meaningful parent participation as one of the core tenets of IDEA. As schools transitioned to distance learning, families became responsible for implementing their child's education. Many parents indicated that schools created a distance learning plan including IEP implementation without parent input. Some parents reported that when they asked to make changes to their distance learning plan, they were told that all students on IEP's had a certain plan or schedule. An example of this was a district that told all the families on IEP's that they would "check in" with them once a week.

Not surprisingly, families are worried about their children during this time. Many families shared that their children are feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and isolated.

## **Moving Forward**

We hope that you will consider your continued and renewed commitment to addressing the glaring equity gap that exists for families and children in Oregon. One

of the core tenets of FACT Oregon is to encourage families to keep their child as their North Star. We are asking you to keep students in Oregon as your North Star as you are making decisions on directing resources to reach children with the greatest need for support.

Including meaningful family participation and partnership with community-based organizations like the ones in attendance today and countless others in our community in a unified approach to effectively support all students and families will be vital moving forward.

Conversations that happened as a result of the Student Success Act coupled with Oregon Department of Education's commitment to equity and inclusion prior to the COVID – 19 pandemic allowed many of us to feel like we were beginning to see some change in ensuring that historically underserved students would receive supports to reduce the academic disparities that exist. Let us not forget the direction that we started and ensure that we allocate resources to our commitment towards equity and inclusion.

Please consider the impact to families due to cross sector budget cuts. Many families who have children that experience disabilities are involved in multiple systems including Developmental Disability services. With budget shortfalls and across the board budget cuts, we are concerned that our most vulnerable populations will be impacted to the point of crisis.

We understand that these are difficult times and that now more than ever we must all come together to support our students in partnership and collaboration.

Thank you for your commitment to ALL children in Oregon.