

June 7, 2019

TO: Senator Rob Wagner, Chair

Senate Committee on Education

FR: Heather Olivier, FACT Oregon, Member of State Advisory Council on Special Education

RE: Informational Hearing

My name is Heather Olivier, and I am a Program Coordinator at FACT Oregon. FACT Oregon's mission is to empower Oregon families experiencing disability in pursuit of whole lives in their community. We do this with focused work in three interconnected areas: expanding awareness, growing community, and equipping families.

I believe that all students should have access to safe, supportive and welcoming schools that are accessible and equipped to meet the educational needs of all students. Teacher access to training and resources gives teachers the tools that they need to support students within a safe and welcoming school.

There are districts around our state that are doing exemplary work in using staff training, engaging families and utilizing community partners to provide resources and supports towards building safe and welcoming schools. Unfortunately, consistency of implementation varies across the state. In schools where this is not occurring, we frequently see students with increased behaviors that result in shortened school days, suspension, expulsion and restraint and seclusion.

FACT Oregon utilizes our data to track trends that families are reporting around the state. The data speaks to requests for help we've received from families that contact our statewide helpline on issues related to behavior in schools for their children. Nearly 40% of requests for support are about behavior. Of the support requests that we receive, most are regarding a school's lack of resources or knowledge about how to support a student's challenging behaviors.

Families are indicating that the critical identification of support through a Functional Behavior Assessment and Behavior Support Plan are either not being done or are not being implemented with fidelity. What we have noticed is that a lack of a Functional Behavior Assessment and inconsistent implementation of a Behavior Support Plan, frequently results in shortened school days, suspension, expulsion and restraint or seclusion. Behavior is communication. With that in mind, we are challenged to get to the root cause of dysregulated behaviors which might be as a result of trauma, behavioral or mental health.

The current conversation around increased behaviors in the classroom must consider the need for improved teacher training which begins with teacher preparation. Oregon's target for students with disabilities accessing a regular classroom for 80% of the time or more is 73%. That means that most students accessing special education are in the general education classroom all or most of the time. Surprisingly, most of our general education teachers finish their teacher preparation programs with as little as one class on special education. In fact, a recent article from May of 2019 in Education Week reported that in a recent study, "many teachers reported they were not required to take courses in working with students with disabilities or found that the courses they did take left them unprepared to work with all students." In this time of shift in education towards safe, supportive and welcoming schools for all, it is imperative that we are removing barriers towards moving in that direction. As a former teacher myself, I know firsthand the importance of access to teacher preparation, training and resources. Increasing the tools in my toolbelt, allowed me the expertise to support all students in my classroom. As a parent of a child that accesses his special education in a general education classroom, I know that the training and support that his teachers receive is vital to my son's success. In order to equip all teachers with the information that they need, we need to shift the expertise in supporting all students from a few to all teachers.

Recent research supports improved behavior as a result of students accessing inclusive settings. In fact, a study conducted in 2016 showed that students with autism who were "academically and socially included" experienced a "more positive developmental trajectory and "fewer antisocial behaviors". Including students in inclusive settings will require a shift in what education looks like in our schools. David Pitonyak states, "We are hard-wired for belonging". Movement towards inclusive settings is supporting belonging in an actionable way. In order to move the needle towards inclusive settings in schools, it will require teacher training and resources, parent education and a change in how we support our students.

Ensuring that all students should have safe, supportive and welcoming schools that are accessible and equipped to meet the needs of all students is important. Decreasing dysregulation and increasing connections that support belonging in inclusive settings will pave the way for greater outcomes for our schools. This will only occur if we are supporting teachers in having access to training and resources that will provide a better understanding of how to meet the needs of all students.

Thank you for the opportunity to share about the importance of supporting all students.