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2019 Regular Session**

**Senate Committee on Education
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Informational Meeting

**Submitted by Elliott P. Dale, Parent, Board Chair – FACT Oregon (www.factoregon.org)
as part of panel: Special Education in Oregon's Schools**

All students should receive school officials' presumption of competence and a viable option to enter the general education setting from the start of their schooling and at any point after.

When a student enters the school system and the school district does not offer a viable placement option in a general education setting in the family's neighborhood school, ALL our students lose out on critical and life-altering opportunities for learning, social and academic development, and lifelong relationships.

The importance of giving students full access to the general education curriculum when they start school cannot be understated. All Oregon students deserve a safe, accessible, and welcoming school environment. And students who experience significant developmental disability have as much to teach us as we have to teach them. Perhaps more.

Here is more context on the individuals I mention in my oral testimony who are navigating or have navigated special education in Oregon.

Meet Victoria Hansen. Friend. Athlete. Chef. Employee.

Victoria is 15 ½. She has two older brothers and lives with her parents in Central Oregon. She loves music, dancing and cooking. She skis, kayaks, plays drums in a band, performs in choir, rock climbs, goes sailing, does anything she wants to do. A few months ago, Victoria gave a keynote speech she wrote herself to 600 people at the Oregon Statewide Transition Conference. She cooks dinner for her family a few nights a week. She wants to be a chef.

Victoria experiences a significant intellectual and developmental disability. Her family lives in a small town, 15 minutes from Redmond. When it was time for her to enter kindergarten, the school district presented her parents with only one option, a self-contained classroom 20 minutes on the other side of Redmond – a 35 minute commute each way for her family. Victoria's mom dutifully visited the classroom, but her vision for Victoria was different: her neighborhood school, a small K-8 school with 400 students, just like her brothers.

Despite the 35 minute commute, and the Hansens' stated goals for their daughter to attend their neighborhood school, school officials (who did not know the 5-year old Victoria) thought the self-contained classroom would be best for her. The Hansens asked the self-contained classroom teacher to come visit her preschool. After seeing this precocious young girl bounce around with enthusiasm and

curiosity, it was ultimately the self-contained classroom teacher that convinced the placement team and administrators to change Victoria's placement to the neighborhood school to give her a chance to enter general education.

So Victoria went from kindergarten through 8th grade alongside her typical peers. There was no special classroom or program. The school and her teachers made it work, and she made it all the way through the general education curriculum. She thrived, developed wonderful friendships, learned no boundaries or limits on what she can or cannot do.

When Victoria entered high school, without knowing Victoria, school officials pushed for her placement into the Independent Living Skills classroom/program, not in the general education curriculum. The high school had never had a student with a similar disability in the general education setting. Students experiencing similar disabilities were always placed in the Independent Living Skills classroom/program. Victoria's parents challenged the school officials to give her a chance to prove herself: Why segregate her now from her peers and friends, she had always been in general education classes and done well? School officials changed their minds, and Victoria started high school in general education classes.

But then when she started classes, her teachers immediately started modifying the curriculum, assuming that she would not be able to handle the assignments her peers received.

Victoria's parents challenged the teachers to allow Victoria the opportunity to try her coursework without modifications. She passed every class the first trimester, with mostly A's and B's. She is continuing to work through the general education curriculum without modification in most of her classes.

Victoria was recently hired to work at a local Mexican restaurant and is very excited to start working when school gets out. The restaurant is also very excited to have her and does not think she will need a job coach or other vocational rehabilitation services.

Would Victoria ever have left the self-contained classroom environment to successfully navigate the general education curriculum and be on track to go to college if she started there in Kindergarten?

Meet Niko Boskovic, a 17 year-old high school graduate living in Portland.

Niko is graduating from high school 2nd in his class. He has completed three classes at Portland Community College (PCC). He plans to complete his associate's degree at PCC, and then transfer to a 4 year school. He started working at Trader Joe's at age 16 and works a few shifts each week.

Niko experiences autism and is nonverbal. Today he is a prolific writer and communicator, but until he was 12 years old, he had effectively no way to communicate.

In Niko's words:

“I remember how my mom took me to a psychologist when I was six for testing. The guy asked me to point to the correct pictures, but sometimes my body wouldn’t cooperate, and I’d touch the wrong one. He later told my mom that my IQ was 30, which was upsetting to her, of course.

I had to go back a number of years later, but this time when he told my mom that my IQ was low, she politely told him she thought his conclusion was bullsh*t and proved nothing except that I was still disabled.. I remember looking at his surprised face and was surprised myself when he thanked her for that perspective. It seems that many parents he saw made those test results the sad benchmark for their child’s future.”

...

“I lost my ability to speak before I turned 3, couldn't attend school because it didn't know how to teach me or handle my behaviors, and had to endure 40 hours of therapy every week. I was born autistic, but had no way to tell anyone what I knew and was capable of learning. It wasn't until I was 12, when I learned how to use a letterboard to communicate, and took my place in high school fully included.”

The letterboard gave Niko a way to communicate, but he needed a receptive environment as well. His mother attempted to get him back into school, but his school district would only provide one option, a self-contained classroom with 12 other students and their aides. She visited and found aides hovering over the students, helping them color in worksheets meant for preschoolers. She feared her son’s growth and development would be stilted.

Niko’s mother eventually found a charter school near their home, and feels very fortunate to have an evaluation team that recognized his potential. He was able to win a placement into that school that put him into a fully integrated general education high school classroom setting. His next years were transformative. Niko has thrived, made friends, excelled academically and found his voice. He writes beautifully and powerfully, both poetry and thought-provoking essays. He is active on social media. You can find him by searching “@nikoboskovicPDX”.

Where would Niko be today if his mother had accepted the only placement option offered by his school district into a self-contained classroom?

He wrote this poem:

A Forest Song Sings Best as a Duet

We are not so different, you and me,
for our roots grow deep and thick,
nurtured by sweet-smelling Oregon firs
that drop their needles
into our waiting palms.

Our leaves spread through canopies
that weave a quiet sleeve of green

and poke through your memories
of being young and in awe
of the mountains.

We are not different at all, you see,
for I am you and you are me.
Make a path through the trees and
follow it down to the place
where we'll meet tomorrow.

Have your heart ready.
Long will we wander
among the wild bees
and young meadow flowers
until our hair is matted down with sap.

I'll comb out the amber and string it
around your wrist
that holds the needles
that prick my heart
into a tattoo of us.

-Niko Boskovic

Meet Rachel Esteve. College Student. Advocate. Employee.

Rachel is 27 years old, lives with a roommate in Portland, has a job, and is a college student in her third year at Portland State University. She is enrolled in the Think College Inclusion Oregon-PSU program, pursuing the Career and Community Studies certificate, a four year program. (<https://www.pdx.edu/career-and-community-studies/>). Rachel participates in general college classes and meets regularly with academic coaches who are themselves students pursuing special education coursework. She is in the first cohort of this program, which adds six students each year.

Rachel experiences a significant intellectual and developmental disability. When she was entering kindergarten, school officials in her town in Oregon pronounced her “uneducable.” They told her parents, “why should we provide this level of service when it is not going to do any good?”

Fortunately for all of us, better work prospects allowed Rachel’s parents to move and start at another school district later that year. She completed high school, splitting time between general education and special education classrooms since kindergarten. She lives with a roommate, and navigates school and work independently. Rachel loves dance, is focusing her coursework on social justice and advocacy, and works part-time for Northwest Down Syndrome Association.

What would Rachel’s life look today like if her parents had accepted the school officials’ prescription for her?

Meet Lizzie Dale. Sister/Friend. Dancer. Explorer. Learner.

My daughter. Lizzie is 7 years old, she enters second grade this fall. She is enrolled in her neighborhood school, along with her sister, a graduating fifth grader, and her brother, entering first grade, but only because we challenged the school district's recommended placement option. She experiences a significant intellectual and developmental disability.

Lizzie is very social and loves to spend time with friends, and outside of school she participates in a regular ballet class. She also plays soccer on her school team, has been involved with Cub Scouts, her school play, and a community theater production running 20 performances of a holiday-themed show.

Lizzie attended regular preschool from ages 2 to 4. Then she was in a typical Pre-K classroom with 10 kids and one teacher – no aide, no special supports. She thrived throughout. When it came time for her placement in kindergarten with our school district, we made it clear that our vision for her was to attend her neighborhood school with her sister, in a general education classroom. The school district administration had other plans for her. They recommended a different school placement, where they had more “resources” for kids “like Lizzie.”

We balked, but we visited the other school to honor the district's placement recommendation. Their model was a classroom where Lizzie would be based with other “special ed” kids in a homeroom with 1:1 or so adult to student ratios, and then “pushed in” to a general education room somewhere between 25% and 75% of the time, depending on her “progress.”

It wasn't a fit for Lizzie or for us. So we challenged the placement. Not without tears and sleepless nights, but ultimately, school officials allowed for a placement option at our neighborhood school, and Lizzie entered kindergarten there. Though our neighborhood school has a special program for children experiencing autism, no other student with Down Syndrome has ever attended the school as far as we know.

We had a fantastic kindergarten year with Lizzie, which we largely credit to our new school principal's vision for an inclusive school community and her kindergarten teacher's creativity and determination. Her first grade year was more challenging and a learning process for us and the school, as we work toward building systems for communication between school and home, and assisting the school district in connecting the dots between her learning specialist, her aide, and her classroom teacher.

Most of Lizzie's story is yet to be written, and will not be without ups and downs at school (just like her siblings). She deserves the same opportunities to learn and grow as every other kid, and to be challenged with high expectations from her school teachers and administrators.

Thousands of students like Victoria, Niko, Rachel and Lizzie enter Oregon's school systems each year. What are our expectations of them? Will they have an opportunity to learn alongside their peers, make friends, influence our society, help us build a better world?