

Dear Oregon Legislature,

My name is Hannah Erickson and I live in Portland, Oregon. My son, Shane Erickson, is academically gifted. He has also, for most of his public school career, been miserable.

Shane is now 8 years old. He learned to read when he was 3. He figured out addition without anyone teaching him. By the time he entered kindergarten, he was reading at a 6th grade level and assessed at 2nd grade proficiency in math. But his teacher had him doing the same work as all the other kids: Identifying vowel sounds in one-syllable words. I don't blame the teacher--the idea is that teachers are supposed to differentiate curriculum within the class for each child, but that's an impossible ask when they have 24 kids with different needs and zero support. And so I watched, heartbroken, as my son began to mentally check out of school. He spent his days in class reading books quietly, or absorbed in imaginary stories. His boredom led to compulsive behaviors. He came home with his fingertips chewed bloody. He got in trouble because he didn't respond when the teacher called on him, because he wasn't there anymore. He came home with report cards showing "no evidence" of competency with math he had mastered years previously ... because he had just stopped doing the work.

The school system utterly failed him. He was tested for TAG in kindergarten and was found to be in the 99th percentile in almost every category. But the only thing his school's TAG coordinator ever did with those test scores was to lose them. Even once I dug them back up and re-sent them to her, she said she didn't have the funding, time, or resources to provide any TAG services for that year.

Shane was so miserable. And before you discount me as a privileged helicopter mom advocating for her special snowflake of a child, let me explain how I knew this: Because I was just as miserable during my own childhood, when I was the daughter of a single mother on welfare and food stamps. It was getting tested for TAG and being put into a special TAG class that not only helped me engage in school and thrive, but also gain the skills to earn a college scholarship and move out of poverty. TAG services changed my life. My son deserves that opportunity to thrive as well.

This year, we finally lotteried into the ONLY school in Portland Public Schools dedicated to TAG students: ACCESS Academy. I have witnessed first-hand how much it has changed my son's attitude toward school. Even given the challenging year of online learning, he is finally engaging in his classes. He is able to take fourth-grade math while in third-grade, and he can actually focus on the work because it challenges him. His classmates don't make fun of him for his advanced vocabulary, and he has made friends who share his interests.

There seems to be an idea that TAG students will be fine, no matter what. But that's not true. They deserve services that work for them, and to make that happen we need additional research done to discover what those services should be. Because we don't have them now--not in Portland, at least. Even with a strong, college-educated, determined mother advocating for him, my son languished in school for three years before even beginning to get the services he needed. I hate to think of what's happening to kids who are like I was: poor, easily discounted, with no one to speak up for them. They deserve instruction that meets their needs, too--and they're not going to get it unless the Legislature forces school districts to pay attention to them. Otherwise, they will stay quietly miserable at the back of the class, reading books and chewing their fingertips bloody, while nobody recognizes their potential and their need.

Thank you,

Hannah Erickson
Portland, Oregon