

Testimony of
Dalia Avello, MA, IMH-E
Board of Directors
Oregon Montessori Association

Before the
House Committee on Early Childhood
2021 Regular Session
on
SB236

SUPPORT
May 17th, 2021

Chair Power, Vice Chairs Zika and Reynolds, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity you are giving me to testify in favor of Bill 236.

My name is Dalia Avello. I serve on the board of directors of the Oregon Montessori Association. I trained as a psychologist. I am also a certified Montessori teacher, have expertise in the fields of education and international development, and have the Endorsement® certification at the highest level in Infant Mental Health. I led my career in international settings, but I have called Oregon my home since 2014.

I have been keenly interested in this bill. Being part of the only country in the world that has not ratified the Convention on Children's Rights, Oregon has the opportunity to demonstrate that it is not afraid of acting to solve an issue that is long overdue.

Although this bill is designed around support for providers, it will ultimately protect children. This is why I was disheartened to hear the language used to describe children, in both the public testimonies and by elected officials. In a public forum, this inaccurate and dangerous language has depicted children as conniving and aggressive beings. Witnessing this misrepresentation of children compelled me to testify today.

For the record, when using the word *children*, I mean toddlers and little children. Children that have been alive less than 1,800 days. Whose physical and socioemotional development is highly dependent on the adults in their lives, and whose brains have more than 20 years left to fully mature.

I identified 4 troubling themes during the hearings:

I. **The representation of children experiencing behavioral issues as “bad and violent.”**

These “out of control” children bully, target, taunt, hit, bite and are overall mean to others.

From a developmental perspective, I can tell you with confidence that there is no such thing as a bad preschooler. Children will typically have antisocial behaviors. They will act up if they are frustrated, angry or in pain. Just like adults, children that have suffered trauma, or are experiencing distress, need a way to express the pain they feel. Because they are little, they will express this in the only way they can.

We should expect children to have these antisocial behaviors in the same way that we should expect adults to have grown out of them.

Instead of referring to preschoolers as “bad and violent,” I propose we talk instead about *children with behaviors that are expressing a need for help, support or love.*

II. **The idea that in spite of providers’ noble intentions and vast experience, they do not have the capacity to serve these “bad children.”** The implication is that expulsion and suspension are the only way of protecting the rest of the students, as well as their own wellbeing.

I question the professional tools these providers use daily in their work. A child suspended or expelled due to limited self-regulation skills, tells me that the caregivers don’t have the experience and training needed to be helpful and nurturing in that situation. The strategies we use with the regular happy children are not the ones we will turn to when we have a child with a behavior expressing a cry for help.

This change is part of a process, and requires time, which is why this bill establishes a coaching relationship and not a one time training. Childcare providers wanting to be successful with all their students need the practice and support included in this bill to get them there.

III. **The argument that children with disabilities, or with externalizing behaviors that are derived from neurodiversity, have needs that some providers could not fulfill.** It was argued that this gap between needs and means was a valid reason to exclude them.

Not only are these situations illegal under the ADA, but also part of a vicious cycle. In this cycle, rejected children learn that they are “damaged goods”. The providers want to send the child to another program that “will serve them better,” even though such a program may not exist or be accessible to that family. The little classmates learn that children who struggle are not deserving while being robbed of the opportunity to learn compassion and tolerance.

And thus, adult professionals and young Oregonians alike cannot learn that neurodiversity has positive elements, and that we need all kinds of brains to move the world forward.

IV. **In spite of comments asserting that preschool suspension and expulsion are behavioral and not racial problems, the numbers don't lie.** I know this is an uncomfortable topic to bring up here in Oregon, but avoiding it and pretending won't make it go away. The more you deflect and gingerly walk around an issue, the more evident it becomes for those around you.

I want to finish by highlighting that these misleading representations of children cannot hide the fact that this bill considers support for all providers, even those who think it's easier to avoid than to work through a problem. It develops a system, provides useful information, clarifies key terms, and gives everyone 5 years to practice these new skills and strategies. A greater and longer opportunity to improve than what adults have given some little children to heal.

Chair Power, Vice Chairs Zika and Reynolds, members of the committee, members of the public. I hope that after hearing these words, the way that we speak about and treat babies and young children will change. I urge you to remember their fragility, but also the possibilities this bill brings for both the child and the teacher to blossom together.