

Submitter: Heather Thompson  
On Behalf Of:  
Committee: House Committee On Education  
Measure: HB2959

My name is Heather Thompson and I am writing today as a speech & language pathologist of 15 years. I am writing to express my support for House Bill 2959.

As a trained health professional in school, I am both licensed and practice within school systems and settings that can sometimes be in conflict with one another. We believe our students deserve the best possible educational journey at every turn and we know that the barriers that provide for these conflicting rules to our licensure are systemic, so we know the solutions will take long-term commitment and dedication.

In my work as a school-based SLP, I have found that the caseload expectations from Oregon school districts do not account for the true workload of an SLP. I've found myself with a caseload of 75 students, the vast majority of whom demonstrated significant enough communication challenges as to place them in specialized educational programs to meet their needs. The true "workload" of such a "caseload" is far more than the 40 hours/week that I was allotted. With workloads this high, student and staff safety is put at risk. In my previous school, with my caseload of 75, I supported 7 different case managers and nearly 20 support staff. It was impossible to properly train staff on supporting students with the most significant communication impairments: those who required augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). The time required to train students and staff on AAC is simply not conducive to a caseload of 75. The outcomes of this impossible reality are unethical and downright dangerous. I've witnessed students having their communication devices taken away for "misuse," leading to students without voices in the classroom. I've witnessed students following adults around all day, with the adults doing all of the thinking, learning, and communicating on behalf of the student. I've witnessed students participating in community outings without any way of communicating needs if they were to be separated from their assistant. I've also witnessed frustrated students destroying property, harming staff, and harming themselves. Unfortunately, this is the reality of a school system that does not take into account the comprehensive needs of complex students.

One clear concern expressed by members from all licensed professionals working in an education setting is the disconnect between requirements of licensure and the realities of practice in schools. That is why we need HB 2959, which will create a Task Force to examine the scope of practice for each type of licensed health professional in schools, establish criteria to help define when procedures are inconsistent with scope of practice, and provide recommendations for alignment.

Thank you for your time today and I encourage the committee to vote YES on HB 2959.

Heather Thompson  
former Speech & Language Pathologist  
at Lake Oswego School District