

March 14, 2023

TO: Senate Education Committee

RE: Support for SB 575, Students With Disabilities Success Plan

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Weber, and Member of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 575. My name is Dedee Wilner-Nugent, and I live in Portland, Oregon. I am a parent of two creative, kind and neuro-divergent children ages 14 and 17. I am also a volunteer and board member for the Shadow Project, an organization dedicated to making school more accessible and engaging for students in Oregon with learning challenges like dyslexia, ADHD, autism and/or trauma. We envision an education system that normalizes and celebrates learning differences, and supports every student to thrive in school.

I'm writing to support SB 575, the Student with Disabilities Success Plan. SB 575 is a top priority of the 2023 Children's Agenda. Students with disabilities face disproportionate systemic inequities, which have led to the worst outcomes of any student group in our state. Students with disabilities have the lowest graduation rates in Oregon, experience a forty-plus gap in basic reading and math by eighth grade, and continue to be disciplined twice as often as other students.

Ableism, aka bias against neuro-divergence and/or physical ability, is the root cause of these inequities among students with disabilities and must be addressed as an EQUITY ISSUE. It is essential to implement policies and practices that promote inclusion, accessibility, and equity for students with disabilities to eliminate systemic barriers. This includes ensuring professional development on best practices for teachers and staff, collecting better data, and prioritizing the engagement of families and students with disabilities through the Special Education Advisory Councils. The tools and skills are there and we just need to start using them!

My family has been dedicated to this cause for generations, but very little has actually changed in schools since my children's grandmother became a special education teacher in the 1980's after our public schools failed to meet her needs as a young student with learning disabilities in the 1960's. She learned to read only because of the dedication and resources provided by her own father outside of school. Two generations later, my own children have faced the same challenges to success as their grandmother did despite radical breakthroughs in our understanding about neuroscience and physical abilities. My children's paternal grandfather also faced significant difficulties and social stigma in school 50 years ago as he struggled to fit in while being on the Autism spectrum and living with ADHD without a diagnosis. The results of these challenges ultimately led him to a life of poverty, addiction and even a period of homelessness. Helping him to recover from these conditions has been a serious challenge for his children. Sadly, the research suggests that the same terrible outcome is likely to be true for my own children unless we act now. The research and best practices are here for the taking to help all children to thrive regardless of their ability or neuro-type but we need the funding and a mandate to apply these proven practices consistently in all Oregon schools.

I urge your support of SB 575 to implement targeted strategies for students with disabilities to ensure their educational success and dismantle ongoing inequities that lead to disproportionate educational outcomes. I urge your support of SB 575 to establish the Students with Disabilities Success Plan so that all students have the resources they need to thrive.

Sincerely,  
Dedee Wilner-Nugent