

My name is Kristin Harquail and I am the Admissions Manager at Serendipity Center. I have worked at Serendipity for 32 years and have held this position for the last 24 years. In my role as Admissions Manager, I work with school district representatives, families, and students from all over the Portland metropolitan area.

In the almost two years since students have returned to Serendipity since the pandemic, the landscape of admissions has changed drastically as it has been so difficult to hire staff to work in the classrooms. We have had to scramble to adequately staff classrooms in order to support the students we serve and to keep everyone safe. Due to this shortage, we have been unable to place new students in the program. For the first time in the 24 years I have done this job, we maintain a waiting list of up to nine students at a time over the course of the school year. Because the majority of these students do not have a placement, they are sitting at home and receiving, on average, 5 hours of home instruction a week.

Most of these kids are not being maintained in their school district. I can't tell you how many times I hear desperation in the voices of parents – they want their kids to be in school. They have spent, in some cases, years partnering with districts and have tried all the available options and none of them were enough to help their child experience success. As a result, our families and students come to us having experienced multiple failed school placements.

Inclusion is a great goal to strive for. At Serendipity, we work with kids to get them ready to return to a school district placement. We agree that they should be close to home and be able to go to school with the other kids in their neighborhood. What is also true, however, is that many of our students have not had a feeling of belonging, or fitting in, or inclusion, until they came to Serendipity. We spend our time building relationships with kids. We focus on teaching them skills to get along with each other and to regulate their emotions so that they can manage and negotiate the bigger and less predictable environment of a big neighborhood school. When they have learned those skills and can generalize those skills, we work closely with districts to transition them back to their district. We want to return to a time when we could reliably be that partner for districts and that safe and supportive school placement for students.

I strongly encourage the support of this bill. Help us find the means to attract skilled and dedicated staff so that we can continue to be a safe haven for these children, and we can continue to partner with school districts to provide quality therapeutic and special education services.