

I have worked as a Speech-Language Pathologist with Portland Public Schools for 12 years. I have worked with students at every grade level, from Kindergarten all the way up to adult transition services for students age 18 to 21.

There are many things I love about my job. There are also things that make my job really hard. Probably the hardest thing about my job, and the job of so many of us working in special education, is the fact that we don't have enough staff to meet the needs of our students.

The only way for school districts to provide adequate staffing for special education is for the legislature to provide adequate funding for special education. That's why I'm asking you to remove the limit on state special education funding for Oregon schools. And I'm asking that you make the increase in special education funding a true increase in the total amount of state school funds going to districts, rather than a re-allocation of existing funds.

I'd like to share a story about a student I worked with a few years ago. My story shows how both special education students and general education students suffer when we don't have the funding needed to provide enough staff to help students with special needs.

Let's call my student Johnny. Soon after starting Kindergarten, Johnny began showing unsafe and disruptive behavior. He would yell, throw items off of his desk, and push other students. He would engage in these behaviors when he was asked to do work he didn't know how to do. He didn't have the skills to communicate with his teacher to ask for help. His behavior scared his classmates. On one occasion, he threw a block at another student's forehead, leaving a big bruise.

When Johnny's behavior was out of control, his teacher would do a "room clear," which means she would move all the other students out into the hallway until Johnny was able to calm down with the help of an adult. Room clears happened at least once a week, sometimes more often than that.

We often brought Johnny to the special education Learning Center at our school to give him a place to calm down. He would yell, throw things and disrupt the lessons that were happening for other special needs students in the Learning Center.

I was only at Johnny's school for half of the week, because I was assigned to work with students at two different schools. We are often spread thin in special education.

Despite the fact that I was only at Johnny's school half-time, I was designated as his special education case manager, which made it my responsibility to create a plan for addressing his communication needs, as well as his extensive behavioral needs.

I did not have specialized training in the area of behavior support, so I reached out to a Behavior Coach in my district to ask for help. The behavior coach's expertise would hopefully make it possible for Johnny and the rest of the students in his class to focus on learning.

To my surprise, I received an email from my special education administrator at the time, chastising me for contacting the Behavior Coach to ask for help. She told me (and the rest of us on the special education team at Johnny's school) that we were not to reach out to the Behavior Coach directly.

She explained that access to the Behavior Coach was restricted, and could only be obtained by putting the request in to her as the special education administrator. She also said we would need to try different interventions and keep data for a minimum of six weeks before we could access help from a Behavior Coach.

She said there were other school teams who were already gathering and submitting data about their students with challenging behaviors, and we would have to wait in line behind those schools. Six weeks felt like an extremely long time to wait when Johnny and his classroom were in crisis nearly every day.

The fact was, our district did not have enough Behavior Coaches to meet the needs of all the students across the district who needed that higher level of support.

Our school team was left to sink or swim on our own. Johnny would not be getting the support he needed anytime soon. Both he and his classmates would continue to have their learning disrupted until the district could provide the necessary support to help Johnny be more successful in the classroom.

Help finally did arrive about halfway through the school year. The daily presence of the Behavior Coach, who had the time to work individually with Johnny every day for about four weeks, made all the difference. Having fewer and fewer disruptions in the classroom meant that Johnny and his classmates could finally focus on learning the foundational skills they needed in order to be successful learners throughout their school careers.

Johnny and his classmates should not have had to wait so long to get help. Their initial, critical months in kindergarten were thwarted because our district did not have the funding and staff needed to provide appropriate support for this child and his class.

Sadly, inadequate help for students with special needs continues to this very day in classrooms across the state. There wasn't enough help to go around back then, and there is not enough help to go around now. Our students with special needs continue to suffer with this lack of resources, and sadly, so do their general education peers.

So what's the solution? It's pretty straight-forward. We simply must have more staff working in schools to meet the needs of our students with special needs. Many more hands on deck are necessary if we are to truly support the students who need it the most to access their learning.

The only way for us to get the help our students need is for the legislature to give our districts the funding they need to hire more staff. You have an amazing opportunity with this bill to improve the lives of thousands of special needs students across Oregon. Thank you for your support!