

Submitter: Michael Kelly
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Education
Measure: SB819

Dear Members of the Committee:

I'm a parent of a 21-year-old experiencing disability who is just now completing Community Transition Program. It has been a very long journey, with a great deal of uncertainty about outcomes, difficulty in measuring those results, and surprising growth that came after many years of work. It is this lived experience that I want to share. It is this lived experience that I believe argues most eloquently in support of SB 819.

Our son, Silas, was born missing roughly 9 genes on one strand of chromosome one. You might ask, "Interesting, but what does that mean?" Good question. And the answer turned out to be, "We won't know until he grows up."

When he was born, the doctors looked at him and an intuitive sense something was going on, but couldn't pinpoint it. As he grew and started missing milestones, they still weren't able to clearly identify all the issues or provide a prognosis. After genetic testing, the best that they could say was that the missing genes played a role in the embryonic neural development, but they still could not provide a prognosis.

During the transition to kindergarten, the district conducted a series of tests that were extremely pessimistic about Silas' ability to learn. He was put into a self-contained classroom with other children experiencing disability. A year later, the kindergarten teacher told us that Silas should redo kindergarten in a Gen-Ed classroom. The following year, the Gen-Ed Kindergarten teacher told us that Silas should NOT be in Gen-Ed.

You get the idea. During that period of Silas' education, we could easily have gotten three different answers about Silas' potential as a student by asking three different educators. And it wasn't just the educators. If you had asked me that question on three different days you might have gotten three different answers. WE JUST DIDN'T KNOW.

Now, at 21, Silas has surprised us all. He now does things that I would not have dared to hope for three years ago. He use standard TriMet busses to travel all over the city. He has a job with Fred Meyer. He takes himself to the store to buy groceries and Star Wars toys. He eats out at restaurants all on his own.

He still struggles with many of the purely academic subjects that were core to his

early assessments. But that doesn't mean that he couldn't learn, and that doesn't mean that there weren't valuable things that public education could teach him. He could, and they did. And gradually, over time, the rate of learning increased to the point where results could frequently be seen almost immediately.

So, I want to encourage you to consider how much we can't know about a child's potential early in their educational career. I'd also like you to consider the ways in which this uncertainty can be abused by districts that are struggling with many, many other challenges. I'm not willing to criticize the individuals trying to make these decisions. I know that it's hard. But if we don't explicitly protect the rights of these children, I'm confident that they will lose in a far greater way than their disability would indicate.