

Dear Members of the Oregon House Education Committee,

My son is struggling to access our local public school. My community is struggling for their children to access public school.

My son Erol is 9 and he is an autistic person with learning disabilities. Erol has been out of school since Halloween 2024. We have a pending SpEd challenge to the Portland School District.

There are many autistic children out of school in PPS, in districts across Oregon and beyond because of a lack of funding to provide adequate support and a lack of understanding of their needs. This blocks autistic children's access to FAPE.

Erol's disability causes frequent misunderstandings among teachers and administrators. Erol will become anxious in the school environment. He might freeze and not initiate a task or not hear instructions due to auditory processing challenges and be off task. These symptoms of autism are interpreted as defiance and willful disobedience when they are not. Teachers and administrators are frequently confused and overwhelmed by Erol's behavioral symptoms and don't have the expertise to support Erol effectively. They often take Erol's behavior personally, become irritable, shout or remove him from the classroom, send him home or restrict him from earned fun or group activities.

Erol's mental health, emotional well being and sense of self are impacted when unsupported at school by trained educators. Our school Principal said she wanted to "train" Erol, "like a dog. Yes. No. Treat." Yes, behavior training is the standard of practice in our schools. It's called Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) and it's harmful to autistic children.

Autism is a disorder of the nervous system causing differences in response to perceived threats or sensory stimuli. We can see malfunctioning nervous systems everywhere. Traumatic childhood experiences—racism, poverty, food and housing instability, illness, the COVID 19 pandemic and more affect everyone's sense of felt safety. Our lives are unpredictable and our nervous systems are hyper vigilant and hypersensitive.

There are excellent programs around the world serving neurodivergent children. These programs are based in felt nervous system safety and sensory support. Organizations like endexclusion.org are providing a platform for these educators to convene. Similar to trauma informed care—applied educational neuroscience is a trauma accommodating framework to address the developing nervous system.

We need a commitment to hiring staff with expertise to support a transition to trauma informed care and applied educational neuroscience. This is the how of DEI. It is how it is done daily in

classrooms, on playgrounds, in SpEd meetings with teachers and administrators and it's the knowledge and practice that is missing from our schools.

Recent PPS budget cuts have further affected our community. Last year BCBA's were cut to just two positions district wide, shifting their responsibilities to school psychologists working at multiple schools. They were not able to do the work. We also lost adaptive PE and the feeding program to end the teacher's strike. They cut SpEd! The cuts to the Behavioral staff affected Erol directly. The SpEd team at our local school was not able to create or implement support plans that met his needs, resulting in prolonged exclusion. They said Erol was "always welcome at school and they were ready to serve, but without a behavior plan they could not support him well." There isn't enough support staff or skills to accommodate my son at PPS at this time in a way that won't impact his mental health and sense of self long term.

In my community, neurodivergent, autistic families at Maplewood Elementary, in the PPS district and in districts across the state, exclusion is rampant. We're faced with impossible choices. Remove our kids from school and choose an online charter or homeschool or risk their mental health and emotional wellbeing and core sense of self.

Erol is out of school while we pursue a legal challenge because the long term price to pay of having him there with limited resources and experienced staff is too high. Many families in my community do not have the privilege to make that choice. I know I'm lucky that I can still work remotely.

School exclusion impacts nearly every facet of our family life. With lost income, careers, instability, long term financial stability, daily mental stress juggling kids at home and employment. This ongoing institutional trauma has affected our whole family, our health, wellbeing.

Washington schools have great programs —Seattle, Bainbridge Island are some that I know of personally, but Washington is funding special education at a much higher level. My understanding is that parents brought a legal challenge to the Washington legislature to fully fund SpEd. It would be great if we could collaborate to meet the needs of all Oregon's children.

Our neighborhood school is at 18% SpEd. Our staff is under-resourced and lacks SpEd training and are actively excluding and harming children with disabilities. Our schools are not intended to harm but to support the community. I encourage you to right this wrong for my family and many others in Oregon and fully fund Special Education in Oregon by passing HB2953 and HB2448

Erol asked who in the government would be working on disabled children's rights? We discussed these bills coming up for a vote in the Oregon legislature. Erol asks for "A disability school that respects us in every city."

Sincerely,

Monica Smiley, Gary Fergus and Erol Fergus, age 9, Maplewood Elementary, Portland Public Schools