

**For House Education Committee Hearing on February 20, 2015**

RE: HB 2597

Dear Chair Doherty and Members of the House Education Committee:

I am Lori Thompson, the Special Education Director for St. Helens School District (SHSD). SHSD serves about 3,200 students, including about 480 students with disabilities. We take our responsibilities toward our students and families seriously. We are focused not only on compliance but on improving educational outcomes for our students. We strongly believe there is one system of education, and special education needs to function within and support that system.

SHSD, like all public school districts in Oregon, and the country, has an affirmative obligation to identify, locate and evaluate children who are suspected of having a disability. Nationwide, 13% of the school populations are identified as having a disability for special education purposes. Oregon, is at 14% and our district is currently at 16%, well above Oregon's 11% cap for special education funding. This data does not suggest that we are under identifying students with disabilities in Oregon.

During the 13-14 school year, SHSD has about 6-7% of its population with severe absences or about 192 students district wide. Last school year our School Board directed the Administrative Team to look at these numbers seriously and address this issue immediately. As a result of this guidance, we have changed our instructional practice and interventions for students with severe absences which have included hiring an intervention specialist and extra support at each level to monitor and work with students and families with chronic absenteeism. At each building level, administrative staff has been focusing on attendance goals for all students providing incentive programs, highlighting awards and celebrating success of increased engagement in attending school. This process is working and as a result of this work during this past school year, attendance has increased to an approximate level of 96%. Treating attendance issues as an automatic reason for a special education evaluation would alter the nature of these successful interventions by mandating automatic special education evaluations for all students without first determining the cause of the nature of the absenteeism and treating that cause at the lowest level.

In addition, HB 2597 assumes that truancy (or unexcused absence) is, by itself, a reason to suspect disability, and requires school districts to conduct special education evaluations for the sole reason that a student is truant or has unexcused absences. We agree that absenteeism contributes significantly to lack of academic achievement but a pipeline into special education is not the answer. Attendance is only one factor that a team should look at to determine whether a special education evaluation is needed. The impact of HB 2597 would potentially double or triple the number of special education evaluations completed in a school year. It costs an average of about \$2,000 to complete a special education evaluation. Completing an additional evaluations (based on number of students with severe absences) would cost the SHSD an additional \$360,000 which is a substantial amount of money for a district our size which could be put to better use through the intervention process.

Last, HB 2597 violates federal law by assigning team-based decisions to the district's special education director. Not only PPS but the state of Oregon would risk loss of all federal special education funds by adopting this measure.

SHSD recognizes that truancy is a significant problem, but it is a general education problem that requires a general education solution. The Oregon Legislature could move this issue toward resolution by convening a work group to look at what other states do to comprehensively address the truancy issue. Washington State has had a law in place for years (see, e.g. <http://www.k12.wa.us/GATE/Truancy/>) and it would be worth studying the effect of that law (and others) before taking a measure such as this that would lead to such unintended consequences. It would be important to find out which states have successfully moved toward closing the attendance gap without increasing disproportionality in special education.

Sincerely,

Lori Thompson  
Special Education Director