David and Aimee Horton

2529 NE 138th Place

Portland, OR 97230

(503) 254-3298

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Oregon State School Funding Task Force

Oregon Department of Education

255 Capitol St NE
Salem, OR  97310-0203

Dear School Funding Task Force:

Please consider this letter as written testimony for the hearing on school funding.

We are writing to share our experience with gifted education in the Parkrose School District. We apologize for the length of the letter, but we are very passionate about our daughters' education and used to be great supporters of public education.

Entering Kindergarten we knew our daughter was unusual because she was reading chapter books and easily completing advanced mathematical equations her head. Within the first few months of Kindergarten her teacher recommended that she be tested for TAG and she was identified as a TAG student. With the TAG identification we were hopeful she would get challenging work and be allowed to grow at her natural pace. Throughout Kindergarten she did not receive more challenging work.

Going into first grade, again we were hopeful that she would get more appropriate work from a new teacher. While that teacher made an effort, the level of work was not pushing her to her ability and her educational needs were not a primary concern.

In second grade, benchmark tests performed regularly by the school revealed that her progress in reading had stagnated and we observed that she was not being educated on grade level in math (our daughter's four year old sister could complete her second grade math homework). Additionally, we were frustrated each year by a TAG plan that took months to assemble and was slowly or not at all implemented.

This experience was as troubling for our daughter as it was for us. In Kindergarten, she had a passion for learning and loved school. By second grade she was continually upset and frustrated by the lack of challenge and classroom distractions. She was losing her passion for learning.

Our daughter is now a third grade student and as a family we chose to home school this year. By removing her from public school we were able to offer appropriate work. Her reading has improved with a focused effort on vocabulary and challenging books that are up to her tenth grade reading level. She learns math through online software. This school year she has mastered all of the third grade lessons and has progressed into fourth grade lessons, without waiting for a new school year. She is involved in a local creative writing class and is taking online classes through Northwestern University. In short, we are working to ignite her curiosity and ensure that she receives the world class education every child deserves. We are thankful to be in a position to intervene and keep her academic interest intact, but are concerned about her social growth without the school environment. Also, as middle class family it is a significant burden to fund her education while paying taxes to support the education of other children.

Throughout our daughter's time in Parkrose Public Schools, as parents we became involved in the District Budget Committee (Aimee) and as a School Board Member (David). Our conclusion from our involvement and our daughter's experience in school is that the system for gifted education is woefully inadequate. The belief that gifted students, 'will be ok', regardless of the schools efforts is common at all levels. However, 'ok', is not an acceptable outcome for any child, let alone those with the greatest capability. As an example of the lack of funding for gifted students, the Parkrose school district budgeted $10,170 for TAG out of a total $28.6 million for 2013-2014 budget, 0.03% . Discussions in school board meetings in 2012 revealed that our daughter's school, Russell Academy, had identified 2 TAG students out of an approximate 480 student population, 0.4%. Even as involved parents, our complaints to district officials went without action. The common theme being that they have no money to spend on gifted education and our child will be "ok".

As believers in public education we sought suitable public school options for our daughter. For multiple years we have applied to numerous charter and alternative school programs in neighboring districts, as our local school district does not have a charter or alternative school at the elementary level. Each application comes with the same reply. Our daughter is unable to be considered or put on the waiting list as an out of district applicant because the demand within the district cannot be fulfilled. This tells us that although some students in neighboring districts have the opportunity for a better suited education, the demand for these services is well beyond the opportunities that are available.

While we don't have a solution to our specific problem or the inadequate education system in the State of Oregon, we believe that the current TAG system is inequitable and does not even attempt to serve the needs of gifted students. We propose that the state set up charter schools, alternative schools or traveling programs for gifted students that give students from all districts access to schools and programs that meet their needs. The schools could be modeled after Portland Public Schools Access Academy and the SUMMA program in Beaverton. Having these schools controlled not by a local district, but by the state would give all students access regardless of their home district.

Our suggestion is one of many and our advocacy for gifted education is surely matched by advocacy for many other student groups. From our experience we hope you see the challenges that families in small, underperforming districts face and find a way to help all students. Please remember that just because a student is gifted, he/she will not be successful without the support of communities and families.

Thank you for your support, we appreciate the sacrifices you make for public service and know you will stand up for the children of Oregon.

Sincerely,

David Horton

Parkrose School District School Board Member 2012-2013

Aimee Horton

Parkrose School District Budget Committee Member 2011-2013