

Portland, Oregon: School board denies education to disabled children

By Katie Hughes
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Last month, parents of medically fragile children were informed that schooling their children was no longer the legal responsibility of Portland Public Schools (PPS). More than three dozen children who have been living full-time in the Center for Medically Fragile Children at Providence Child Center are left to whatever resources their families can acquire for their schooling.

Many of these children require 24-hour care and intensive nursing services. With such extensive and most likely expensive care needed, hiring a private instructor or home schooling may not be an option for most families. Nichole, mother of eight-year-old Joslyn, told the *Oregonian*, “I don’t know where they expect her to go”.

Since 2004, Portland schools have taken in many of these children, providing more instruction and interaction with students of the general population. School officials in May sent out a letter, with no warning, to more than 40 families stating that after reviewing state law these children’s education is not their responsibility. It stated that Oregon law does not require Portland Public Schools to educate children whose guardian does not live within the school district.

The Center for Medically Fragile Children is the only pediatric skilled nursing facility in the Pacific Northwest. It provides intensive highly specialized care for children from as far away as Alaska and California.

The district was prompted to review the necessity of educating Providence Child Center students after receiving a bill for a child who resides in an out-of-state medical facility but who has a Portland residing parent. Because the student was being educated outside of the school district it was decided to be outside the scope of the district’s responsibility. The savings from this decision amounts to about \$1.5

million.

In a letter to the *Oregonian*, Mary Pearson, director of Special Education for Portland Public Schools, said, “We wish that we could continue to educate all students without regard to cost. Yet we are also obligated to be mindful stewards of taxpayer money, especially as our resources have grown ever tighter and the demands on those resources ever higher.”

Cuts in education spending are pervasive throughout the Portland School District. Textbooks are outdated, class sizes are too large, and basic supplies are in high demand. Funding by the state and federal government has continuously declined, with the PPS operating \$117 million short of its recommended funding level.

Teachers are facing major trials due to budget cuts as well. Earlier this month at a public meeting hosted by the Portland Association of Teachers it was discussed how the newest contract by the school board is making ever greater demands and setting ever higher expectations, giving teachers little to work with. However, president Gwen Sullivan made it clear in an interview with the *Oregonian* that the union was not preparing a strike despite the draconian concessions demands of the school board.

Cuts to education are slicing deeper and deeper, and not just in Portland. The excuse that “there isn’t enough money” is an untrue statement, especially when major billion-dollar corporations such as Apple and Nike are managing to avoid paying taxes by using legal loopholes.

This year, Nike only agreed to a major expansion in Oregon instead of going elsewhere as long as the state kept its policy of only levying taxes on in-state sales. Using some publicly available information, it was estimated that Nike shaved more than 90 percent (about \$17 million at the time) off its tax bill, enough to fund

education for medically fragile children as well as many other much needed resources for public education in Oregon.

This latest assault on the most vulnerable section of the population—in this case out-of-state and medically dependent—is a foreshadowing of even deeper attacks on public education as a whole, which is a basic social right.

Katherine, mother of a child being cared for at Providence, said, “I understand the challenge of educating these kids, but it’s their right to have an appropriate education.”

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