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Pandemic Won't Stop Kids with Disabilities from Persevering with Learning

The nonprofit Shadow Project will champion success for students who learn differently this fall, wherever they are learning

August 5, 2020 (Portland, OR) – When COVID-19 struck, Bailey, a Portland fourth-grader, was nervous. Bailey has learning disabilities that make reading and writing difficult. On top of that, now she had to learn from home in a virtual classroom, which quickly became the reality for all Oregon students last spring. But Bailey has a local nonprofit in her corner that has stayed with her since school shut down – and will continue to support her when school reopens.

That nonprofit is [The Shadow Project](https://www.shadow-project.org), which helps students who have ADHD, dyslexia, autism and related learning challenges to thrive in school.

Bailey is among Oregon's nearly 80,000 children with disabilities that affect learning. These capable learners have conditions that make it difficult to read, focus or process information. The Shadow Project has teamed with special education teachers to foster academic and social-emotional growth for over 12,500 Portland-area children who learn differently. When the pandemic struck, the Portland-based nonprofit adapted its classroom-based programs for learning at home, keeping kids like Bailey reading, setting goals and harnessing their resilience. Many families have continued using Shadow Project over the summer.

In the upcoming school year - riddled with uncertainties for students and teachers alike - Shadow Project will be there to champion our courageous kids. The pandemic has put children with disabilities, who are already among the state's most underserved student populations, at high risk of falling further behind. Shadow Project will work with special education teachers to give students uninterrupted support and a consistent routine wherever they are learning.

Bailey will be among the 1,300+ students in Shadow Project programs this fall. Honored as the organization's Student of the Month in July, Bailey offered this message to other children who learn differently:

"There are a lot of other people with the same challenges as you, just like me. You shouldn't feel alone. Be proud of how hard you're working. Shadow Project motivated me to work even harder to reach my goals."

Bailey's family is thrilled with her reading and writing progress since her school began partnering with Shadow Project one year ago. During the school shutdown, she continued to persevere with online classes, with Shadow Project motivating and celebrating her effort along the way.

“We’re so excited to see Bailey’s new commitment to learning. She has been very proud of her accomplishments and Shadow has helped to keep her focused on her goals,” said Bailey’s mom, Heidi Lutz.

About The Shadow Project The nonprofit has partnered with K-8 schools to unleash the potential of over 12,500 Portland-area children who learn differently, providing structured, social-emotional learning programs and trauma-informed, culturally-responsive training to school staff. Once discouraged students are taking ownership of their own learning goals. With assistive technology designed for their needs, and a caring mentor to encourage progress, they have gained as much as two years in their reading ability, turning "I can't" into "I CAN!"

The Shadow Project’s goal is to transform school into a place where students who learn differently can thrive, experiencing autonomy, belonging, and healthy academic growth. To do that, their team works collaboratively with schools to set high expectations and celebrate the inherent worth of every child. [When the virus shuttered schools, Shadow Project quickly adapted its classroom-based programs for remote learning at home.](#)

“We went into action the minute school shut down, to support teachers in keeping children confident, motivated and engaged in learning,” says Christy Scattarella, founder and executive director of the Portland-based nonprofit. The organization also developed a summer program, working directly with families to strengthen vital skills like reading, goal-setting, and perseverance. “Children in The Shadow Project come to recognize themselves as capable and courageous,” she said, “something they’ll need more than ever as they navigate a school environment that will be vastly different than the one they left.”

The Oregon Department of Education is prioritizing meeting the needs of students from communities of color that have been historically underserved. Half of students in Shadow Project programs are from communities of color. Scattarella and her team believe they have an added responsibility to demonstrate leadership this fall.

“Now is the time to boldly reimagine learning,” she says. “The movement for racial justice has really brought this to the forefront. Students from Black, Latinx and Native American communities experience a double barrier of racism and able-ism.”

Effective partnering with special education teachers holds the key to Shadow Project’s success. Scattarella calls these educators “heroes” that champion children whose tremendous strengths often go overlooked. The vast majority of teachers who partner with Shadow Project report their students benefit greatly, academically and social-emotionally.

In a June 2020 evaluation, 93% of participating teachers reported their students strengthened social emotional skills that helped them to cope with the pandemic and/or engage in distance learning. Students demonstrated increased motivation and determination, greater participation in online learning, and an enhanced ability to manage stress and anxiety in the wake of the virus outbreak.

“Working from home was a challenge for many of my students. The program supported a sense of normalcy. Having a locus of control helped them cope with the stresses of the pandemic,” shared Lori Ryan, a special education teacher in Portland.

As one special education teacher put it, Shadow Project is addressing one of the greatest challenges her students face right now: “seeing their value and potential.”

The Shadow Project FAQs and images

History: Founded by Christy Scattarella, whose son Alex has ADD and dyslexia. Became a 501(c)3 nonprofit in 2003

Fun Facts: Organization named for Alex's dog, Shadow. Students earn "Shadow" bucks for making progress toward their goals. *The Boy Who Learned Upside Down*, an award-winning children's book based on Alex and Shadow's story, is used by special education teachers to help children recognize themselves as capable and courageous

Schools and students served: Portland Public, Reynolds, Parkrose, Centennial, McMinnville and Salem-Keizer School Districts. Over 12,000 students since inception

Who is available to interview: Bailey and her Mom, Christy, a teacher, a student and/or family member, Les Schwab rep., who sponsors students in the program

Photos and video are available for media use, as well as illustrations from *The Boy Who Learned Upside Down*