

OREGON LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY TESTIMONY:

RUSS DONDERO, 1506 Limpus Lane, Forest Grove, 97116; (503) 357-3345 (home); e-mail: dondero1@easystreet.net

- Professor Emeritus, Department of Politics & Government, Pacific University, Forest Grove, Oregon
- Citizen Advocate/Strategist, Washington County Interfaith Committee on Homelessness
- Vice Chair, Washington County Citizens Action Network
- Member, Washington County Thrives

The opinions expressed in my testimony are my own based on my observations as a scholar of the "politics of public education" over the last 20 years and my experiences as a parent and an engaged citizen.

I am not speaking for the community groups I'm involved with in Washington County cited above which seek to make our county and the state a better place to live for all of our citizens but especially for the most vulnerable among us – in this particular case at risk children and their families struggling to overcome poverty, hunger, health care disparities, homelessness and/or under or unemployment.

In my judgment the quality of a polity is best expressed in how it treats the least of its citizens.

"Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."
- George Santayana

Mr. Chair and Members of the Committee,

I'm here to testify about Governor Kitzhaber's educational reform plan conceptually laid out in SB 1581 and HB 4165.

While I applaud the Governor's intent to free Oregon from the onerous grasp of NCLB and his desire to create a seamless student-centered, birth to college educational system, I have concluded that these efforts at reform will lead us down the same failed path that the Katz Plan did in 1991 and NCLB has done since 2001.

- The Governor's early learning plan focuses on integrating and streamlining nutrition, health care and preschool

services for 108,000 at risk children to enable them to be ready for kindergarten and beyond.

The enabling language of HB 4165 which is grafted onto the old Commission on Children & Families ORS does not specify how these "integrated services" will be delivered by "school based" 10,000 "at risk" children case managers, nor how such workers will be certified or trained.

- His K-12 initiative is designed to create accountable "achievement compacts" committed to improving outcomes and tailoring outcomes to the circumstances of individual districts.

The language of SB 1581 does not spell out a transparent description of how these goals are to be achieved. What prevents this process from resulting in different goals and objectives district by district thereby compromising comparability and accountability?

The Past as Prologue:

"Many corporations want school reform without raising taxes. To many business leaders, these two goals are achievable by enforcing curriculum standards through testing. Magically schools will improve through testing and by not investing more money in schools."

- Joel Spring, professor at New School University in NYNY, author and expert on US & global education

Like previous reform efforts, the Governor has left the funding of his proposed reform for another day aside from pilot programs. Likewise the design of how professional staff will be selected in the early learning program and district compacts is opaque. As we all know the devil is in the details, and while the Governor offers conceptual scaffolding much is left to imagination.

Even the Oregonian editorial board that endorses the Governor's plan raises these fundamental questions:

"...It's not clear whether the achievement compacts the governor seeks will drive the kinds of changes and improvements Oregon needs. The state would send teams into troubled schools to "diagnose" the problems, propose fixes and show how other schools with similar

student populations have had success.

Will this kind of supportive accountability system work? Or is it too soft, another kid glove that Oregon wants to fit cozily over its lowest-performing schools?"

Despite Oregon's pioneering Educational Act for the 21st Century and the federal government's NCLB Act – 20 years later Oregon is still faced with an achievement gap and drop out rate which give no evidence that outcomes based education is the panacea that political leaders from both parties and the business community have trumpeted from the Reagan administration's "A Nation at Risk" to the Obama administration's "Race to the Top."

I see no reason to be assured the Governor's conception of reform will end any differently. In fact, I'm convinced we will be back here in 20 years debating why, where and how this plan went south on our kids and us.

Again the Oregonian editorial board raises a basic political question:

"...Yes, there are risks. The governor is asking the Legislature to grant unprecedented power to a single unelected individual, a chief education officer with the authority to ride herd over every aspect of the state's education system. He's asking teachers to agree to achievement compacts built largely around standardized test results, the very thing teachers dislike most about No Child Left Behind. He's asking parents to take this on faith; even the most involved parents can only guess how these reforms might affect their kids' school..."

Top Down Reform:

The Governor's plan is classic "trust me" top down approach advocated by those in the political and business elite, termed "educational bureaucrats" by Joel Spring, who have no personal experience in the classroom. A December 1, 2011 Oregonian article by Betsy Hammond describes this group as...

"...A small group of education advocates, led by Nike government and public affairs director Julia Brim-Edwards and the vice president of the state teachers union... spent months fleshing out what the education officer would do and what authority the officer would have..."

This is the same group of business leaders who have designed past failed education reform efforts in Portland and/or Oregon. They

operate within a hermetically sealed "group think" policy wonkish bubble with a corporatist bias without benefit of first hand classroom experience or knowledge of extensive research on this subject.

"An expansive academic industry has now evolved around the elements of what is known generically as "standards-based reform." Graduate schools of education offer courses in accountability reform, not for future teachers but for future leaders in the world of education policy, which are often taught by people who have no experience in education but whose expertise lies in the world of systems management."

*- **Jonathon Kozol**, the nation's foremost observer of public education and author many books including *Death at an Early Age & Savage Inequalities*.*

What's the Problem?

Instead of relying on best practices based on educational research and the experience of classroom teachers, students and parents, the Governor's plan like its predecessors is founded on a theory without any evidence to back it up.

But more importantly it misdiagnoses the problem we face in helping young people succeed in school. The problem is not children or schools – it's a climate of socio-economic inequality the Occupy Wall Street movement has awakened us to.

The reasons the CIM & CAM failed and why NCLB has failed to close the achievement gap is that teaching to the test doesn't alter the economic, social and family circumstances from which students come when they go to school.

As a colleague and professor of education said recently in a town hall on education -

"...It is easy to point a finger at teachers, however, they are only the whipping boys in a society devolving at its fabric. Poverty, funding disparity, and cultural disempowerment are the root causes of problems in education, and setting tougher standards will change none of this..."

With 1 in 5 children in Oregon living in poverty, more Oregon families facing hunger or homelessness and so many Oregonians being

un or underemployed, children come to school not ready to or able learn because of these outside factors. Reversing them must begin from birth to 3, the time when the brain develops the most.

Sadly, the kind of education one's children get is often related to demographic factors. If one lives in an upscale neighborhood the chances are your children will get access to a high quality public education. Those who don't, children of the working poor or racial minorities, are more likely to be denied such access

Blaming the Victims:

What Oregon kids and families need is a state government that directs its resources toward ending homelessness, hunger, poverty and unemployment not a government that in effect blames the "victims" - the children and families of the working poor. The challenge we face is not a design problem; it's an economic justice problem.

Bringing about socio-economic justice to Oregonians is the best education reform plan!

If we address the economic crisis before us and return Oregon to a middle class state like it was when I grew up in Roseburg – the then Timber Capital of the USA – our young people will succeed in school and move into the marketplace or on to college. But if we don't address these underlying causes of school failure – nothing will change.

[The] Progressive faction [in education] has professional interests tied to child-centered teaching, whole language reading instruction, and programs promoting of educational opportunity."

- Joel Spring, educator & author

A close friend, volunteer school reader, author and professor emeritus of English at Pacific University, George Evans made this observation in a blog I posted this past week –

"The gradual failure of our primary and secondary schools is another disturbing factor. American schools compare badly with schools in Canada, Finland, Denmark and other countries, and that is, in part, because of our huge income disparity and our unwillingness and inability to appropriately fund the schools."

The Achievement Gap:

Rex Hagans, educator, founding member of Oregon's "Save Our Schools" and member of EMO's public policy board suggests we need to diagnose the problem before we turn to presumed solutions. Hagans suggests we employ the "five whys" of diagnoses and problem solving:

Why 1: Why are high school and post-secondary graduation rates too low?

Answer: The high school dropout rate is far too high.

Why 2: Why is the high school dropout rate far too high?

Answer: There is still a persistent achievement gap between students living in poverty and those who are more affluent.

Why 3. Why does this achievement gap persist?

Research shows that low-income students experience significantly more health, hunger and social problems, which present major barriers to learning.

Why 4. Why do these health, hunger and social problems present barriers to learning?

Answer: The challenges of families in poverty include a debilitating focus on daily economic survival. This survival focus prevents necessary medical and dental health care, social development, and opportunities to nurture and accelerate children's natural learning ability.

Why 5. Why haven't we removed these barriers to learning?

Answer: There has been inadequate state financial support for strong, ongoing and tight coordination between our schools and health/social services organizations in order to remove poverty's barriers to learning.

Instead of tinkering with the governance system of Oregon's 197 public school districts, colleges and universities via implementing community based "achievement compacts" in what amounts to an "unfunded mandate" - we need reinvigorate the "social compact" for

public education to create a level playing field for all our children, families and communities.

School is Personal:

My own schooling history is an example of the luck of the draw. I was born premature at 4 lbs, 4 oz in 1942. As I grew up in Seattle and attended Maple School in the Beacon Hill neighborhood through the 4th grade, I missed school a lot due to a variety of childhood illnesses. Fortunately my mother was a nurse. But I struggled in school

After my father's work took us to Palo Alto, California just before my 5th grade my family rented just blocks from Middlefield School which served an upper class white community. The curriculum was very child-centered and enriching. I was especially blessed to have Ms. Stanley for my teacher. She was a young teacher and gave her students lots of encouragement.

Palo Alto is the home of Stanford University. I had access to a great public library and of Stanford that opened its campus to local youths. I participated in a youth sports week where I met Olympian Bob Mathias. But most importantly given the moderate climate I never missed a day of class for the first time!

Moving to Roseburg came at just the right time. The climate was like the Bay Area, I played summer baseball and continued private piano lessons which began in Seattle. But most importantly while Roseburg was hardly an affluent community, then or now, I had people who looked after me in school and beyond.

Given an often-turbulent family life due to issues between my parents, I could have easily slipped through the cracks but I didn't because of a great Dad, my best friend's Mother and my Grandmother-like piano teacher. I also had the good fortune to have some excellent teachers who stepped up for me at key times.

Had NCLB been in vogue I suspect I would have not fared well because the pressures on teachers now is to make school a "one size fits all" process. Thanks to an English, a speech/debate, a social studies, a French and a physics teacher I graduated in the top of my class at RHS and moved onto Whitman earning a BA and then to the University of Minnesota earning a MA and PhD.

Just for the record, my scores on standardized tests were never impressive! We have multiple intelligences not one. Why design an

education system with an industrial model in a post-industrial age which forces square pegs into round holes? Ask Bill Gates or Steve Jobs...

Moving the Deck Chairs on the Titanic:

The heart of the Governor's plan is essentially a scheme which merely moves the deck chairs of Oregon's educational Titanic – it doesn't melt the Iceberg of poverty and socio-economic marginalization that is at the heart of the so-called achievement gap.

I have taught future teachers and feel that colleges and universities are doing an excellent job in preparing future teachers. I taught in Pacific University's 5th Year MAT program for 13 years as an adjunct professor. My course "School & Society" was required of all students in this rigorous program.

While I think future teachers who come through such a program are more likely to be excellent teachers, my wife, with a BA in psychology from Whitman plus a teaching certificate (and later an MA in education from Pacific) has had a successful career as an elementary teacher and a youth services librarian.

The problem with teachers is not their training; it is that they have gotten less and less support in terms of opportunities for professional development since Measure 5 passed in 1991. Oregon's achievement gap is the canary in the mineshaft of our disinvestment in education pre-K to higher education since the early 1990s.

A colleague in Pacific's College of Education, Professor Mark Bailey, diagnosed the problem we face well at a recent public forum in our community -

"...I believe that public education is in crisis: but probably not the crises that you would imagine. I am convinced that this is mainly a crisis of confidence.

Confidence in our schools and in our teachers and in the entire system we have designed to educate our children.

The roots of this manufactured crises can be found in political utility, in capitalist opportunism, and in well intentioned but misguided reforms..."

Funding not Assessment is the Problem:

Until Oregonians confront the revenue crisis before us, we will never be able to hire enough qualified teachers, have smaller classes

and support a comprehensive educational system which includes not just the "basics" of reading, writing and math but also art, foreign languages, literature science, social studies, shop, health and physical education.

The governor's plan has put the cart before the horse.

As Professor Bailey said at the forum in Forest Grove –

"...First, the origins of our problems are not in our system of education, but in the manner in which our society agrees to fund & support each other.

Second, every one of the students and teachers that I have worked with were different: had different needs, styles of teaching & learning, strengths & interests. And all appreciated being treated as distinct individuals. One size of a standardized curriculum will never fit all..."

But let's assume all the changes proposed by the Governor take affect. Let's assume we get coherent locally based assessment goals from the 197 school districts in the state. Let's assume that we can find and place well-trained school based "case managers" for "at risk" children and families.

Where will the money come from to pay for such educational and social resources providing wrap around services for children and their families? Until we repeal the cumulative dead weight of Measures 5, 46 and 50, get rid of the "kicker" laws and demand equity in taxation, these reforms will be stillborns.

If we decentralize school reform we also need to return financial control of local schools to the communities where they reside while the state provides "equity funding" to economically challenged communities mainly outside the Portland metro area in "the other" Oregon.

We've been dodge ball with revenue reform for 20 years. It's time to "man up" to this challenge.

Fixing Kids and Families:

Beyond these serious fiscal issues – if one can identify a dysfunctional family - how can school personnel intervene prenatally to 3rd grade without becoming the equivalent of truant officers of the state? When does the Orwellian nature of this enterprise step into the breach to place at risk children into foster care? If bad parenting leads to failure in school is foster care the default position?

I would rather return to the original conception of the Katz Plan that promised but never delivered on the idea of each school having a social services component in the building which would help parents be good parents and children are successful learners. Somehow many of the truly innovative ideas of Katz were side tracked by mind numbing high stakes testing – the CIM and CAM.

I vividly remember sitting in a session held in Washington County early in 1992 explaining the rubric-based assessment criteria that were to replace traditional grading. Despite being a PhD I was transported to a Brave New World of meaningless jargon empty of any content one could understand as a faculty person or parent.

When I read the bills associated with the Governor's scheme I have a déjà vu experience. Here we go again down the rabbit's hole of teaching to the test, assessments. My reaction is reflected in the by two other Pacific colleagues in our Eugene campus, John Lockhart and Todd Twyman -

According to its December 15 report, the OEIB - "The state will continue to set standards, provide guidance, and conduct assessments, coordinated along the education pathway."

In addition, "That mutual partnership—tight on expected outcomes at the state level, loose on how educators get there—will be codified in annual achievement compacts between the state and its educational entities."

Here we go again, more teaching to the tests under the mantra of being "tight" and "loose" whatever that empty jargon means!

Moving from Monologue to Dialogue:

Instead of taking a top down approach to education reform and accountability, why doesn't the Governor and the business community of Oregon sponsor a week long conference at Portland's Convention Center where teachers, parents and scholars can share their experiences, best practices and research based ideas on how to reform schools.

As my Eugene colleagues suggest -

"...we need to engage in substantive and sustained democratic dialogue about our schools... so that we use our funds in wise and informed ways... Such an effort would be a more difficult path than OEIB has set out for itself, but one more likely to create schools that better serve the needs of Oregon students...."

If we empower those on the front lines, then will we get the "ownership" necessary to make real reform possible. It's about time we turned the conversation over to Oregonians, not politicians, educational bureaucrats and businessmen who think education means workforce training as opposed to life long learning!

If we continue this top down path we will repeat the same mistakes that caused the CIM to fail, the CAM to be stillborn and NCLB to be reviled as a waste of time, of resources and a system to be gamed by rampant cheating. We risk sacrificing another generation of Oregon students on the dubious promise of another top down scheme of "trust me, Dr. K knows best."

As the saying goes – "a mind is a terrible thing to waste." So is another generation of students.

"I came to the conclusion ... that No Child Left Behind has turned into a timetable for the destruction of American public education," she tells Fresh Air's Terry Gross. "I had never imagined that the test would someday be turned into a blunt instrument to close schools — or to say whether teachers are good teachers or not — because I always knew children's test scores are far more complicated than the way they're being received today."

*– **Diane Ravitch**, former Assistant of Education in the George W. Bush administration and now a critic of policies she once supported*