

Testimony to House Education Committee
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By

Tom Olson, Canby community volunteer
(contact attskiis@aol.com)

Testimony Presented On Behalf of Oregon Save Our Schools

IT' S TIME OREGON SERIOUSLY CONFRONTS POVERTY' S IMPACTS ON LEARNING

Problem

"Mrs. Smith, my mouth hurts awful bad!"

Children whose teeth are decayed do not learn well. Children who are hungry do not learn well. Children with serious mental or physical health problems and no access to health insurance do not learn well. *"Children in poverty are more prone to asthma-sleeplessness, irritability and lack of exercise. They experience lower birth weight as well as lead poisoning and iron-deficiency anemia, each of which leads to diminished cognitive ability and more behavior problems. They switch schools more often as their parents search for a job* (Richard Rothstein, Economic Policy Institute). They come to kindergarten with a vocabulary of about 3000 words, while their more affluent friends bring 20,000 words (US Dept. of Education). This is only a partial list of the well-known types of learning barriers wrought by conditions of poverty.

The Oregon Education Investment Board will soon recommend to you four state "strategic investments." Not one of these investments directly confronts issues of removing poverty' s barriers to learning. The basis for OEIB recommendations that you will hear rests on an assumption that all our schools need is simply "more data" to improve. In fact, the OEIB is looking at a \$50 million price tag for their so-called "statewide longitudinal data system."

But, "more data" doesn't provide fillings for teeth. or access to doctors when the family is uninsured. or food for children who have nothing to eat over the weekend. More data doesn't fix the vagaries and emotional stresses from a family headed by a single parent when she is struggling every minute to make ends meet.

The *number of Oregon students on Free & Reduced Price Lunch increased 58% between 1997 and 2010.* We have certainly experienced this in Clackamas County where students in poverty doubled during the past decade. Even in our relatively small community of Canby, 54% of our elementary students now live in poverty. And we have nearly 400 students who are homeless. In Canby, as elsewhere across the state, we face one central unmet need --- good coordination of school-based health and social services to remove poverty' s many barriers to learning. Every year we community volunteers work with the school district to "scramble" to find small grants from philanthropic groups to support these services because state funding does not provide the needed support.

Solution

Passage of House Bills 2665 and 2867 will greatly elevate the state's policy and financial commitment to removing poverty's barriers to learning. The studies conducted under these two pieces of legislation will provide you with the policy evidence that can lead to smart investments in such services.

We encourage your strong support of these two bills, with one important caution. Those who conduct the studies should be selected based on their extensive front-line experience in and deep knowledge about effective ways for school based programs to remove poverty's barriers to learning. The highly paid consultants who have worked for OEIB so far have demonstrated neither. In fact, they have demonstrated that they have put on blinders to this central issue in educational improvement across the state.. So we encourage your careful oversight of this as these bills are passed and the studies are implemented.

Thank you.