

**Testimony before the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education
George Russell - Education Committee Co-chair, NAACP Eugene/Springfield
March 14, 2013**

Good afternoon. I would like to submit a statement for the record in support of Senate Bill 297.

For the record, my name is George Russell. I am a former superintendent of Eugene/4J Public Schools and currently serve as the education committee co-chair of the NAACP-Eugene/Springfield Branch. This branch is a member of the Oregon Alliance for Education Equity (OAAEE)

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony.

As a former superintendent, I understand the limitations, opportunities and realities of what's faced in classrooms and schools on a daily basis. While I believe strongly that what happens between teachers and students in the classrooms is the most important ingredient for student success, I also believe that we tend to underestimate the impacts of parents, family and community on students' readiness to learn. I know that educators are really working hard to address the achievement gaps and educational inequities that exist within our school systems. As a superintendent, I was involved with both trying and observing many approaches to provide greater opportunities and improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged and under-represented students, with some successes and a lot of failures.

As a result, I've become convinced that try as they may, educators and schools will only see marginal and fleeting successes in closing achievement gaps unless they come up with better and more genuine ways to engage parents/families and communities in a realistic assessment of the challenges faced, and in the development and implementation of workable solutions. Parent and community involvement can positively impact school culture, working conditions, and student achievement. Community-based organizations, such as those in OAAEE, can help bridge cultural and racial differences that exist in many schools and create opportunities for positive and productive relationships between schools and the parents/community. To discount the role that parents and community can play as part of a comprehensive strategy to close the achievement gaps would be a significant misstep.

Lack of parent and community involvement in schools and districts has a number of drawbacks. Schools cannot teach children well if teachers lack an understanding of their students' cultures and lives, if they lack meaningful relationships with their families, or if educators see families as only problems to be fixed. Some schools may have "deficit" views of low-income parents or parents of color, seeing them as incapable of supporting their children's success rather than as untapped resources. This can lead to a hostile environment where parents don't feel comfortable interacting with the school or the school system, and to a vicious cycle: parents don't come in because they don't feel welcome, then the school further blames parents for not being engaged. Without efforts

to build relationships between the two, parents and teachers can become locked in a counterproductive cycle of mutual blame and distrust. Educators don't believe parents have any thing of value to contribute to the solution, and parents believe that educators don't care about their kids or their culture and community. Teachers, parents, and community working together as partners with valuable contributions to bring to the table can help move the agenda of student success forward for the better.

A district that actively welcomes parents and sees them as important stakeholders with valuable knowledge and expertise can build the trust and support throughout a community that is necessary to sustain reform and enhance parent and community efforts to support learning outside of school. Parents, with the help of community-based organizations, can play a key role in initiating a culture shift that bridges language, cultural and racial differences and positively affects student achievement. Such parent and community involvement has to go beyond bake sales, PTA meetings, and parent-teacher conferences however to really engaging parents in making decisions about their children's learning and drawing from their interests and talents.

Similarly, community-based organizations can play a key role in creating opportunities for positive and productive relationships between schools and the community. This may include introducing educators to the community through open houses, home visits, and community tours or participating in efforts to build deeper cultural understanding in schools. Recent research has shown that effective parent and community engagement has resulted in higher student outcomes including higher attendance, test score performance, high school completion, and college-going aspirations. It can also help build school-community relationships, parent involvement, and trust that contribute to improved schools. Finally, it can stimulate important changes in educational policy, practices, and resource distribution at the system level that expand school capacity and equity, especially in historically underserved communities.

Including parents and community representation on Achievement Compact Advisory Committees will go a long way toward ensuring that family and community perspectives are brought to bear on the problem and are considered in the development of proposed strategic solutions.

Thank you.