

Testimony by Todd Miller
Oregon Connections Academy
On Oregon House Bill 2457
March 19, 2012

Chairman Barnhart, members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share our public school's perspectives on House Bill 2457, legislation that would reduce the funding for our school and others like it in Oregon – and would put our children's public education at risk.

Before I discuss this legislation, I would like to spend a few minutes introducing – or re-introducing -- you to our school, which is not a place where students simply receive an online course or two, but a full school, and most importantly, the Oregon students and families behind the numbers.

Students throughout Oregon are thriving at Oregon Connections Academy (ORCA). Our students receive a fully online, top-quality public education with a curriculum that meets our state's rigorous state education standards. Oregon state-certified educators teach our students, and we offer additional support from trained counselors, principals, and administrative staff. Students receive the textbooks and curriculum materials needed to participate in a dynamic online learning environment, and participate in small group discussions and lessons with a teacher through our LiveLesson sessions.

In short, instead of our students riding a bus or being dropped off at school by their parents, we're able to deliver a quality public education, for those students that it is appropriate for, directly to them, wherever they may be located in the state.

Our fully-accredited program not only offers quality academic programs to students, we also provide a wide variety of other opportunities to round out students' education experience, including study sessions where students meet teachers for individualized help at area libraries or other convenient locations; field trips that give students and families the opportunity to learn together and make new friends; clubs and other extracurricular activities that foster social development and academic growth.

Of our 3400 students currently enrolled, 49% qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch, which is in line with the state average of 50%¹ (and we do not receive any federal Title 1 money currently), 7% are Gifted, which is the same as the state average and 16% have an IEP or 504 plan, above most districts in the state.

¹ Data captured at Open Books Project website, March 16, 2013,
http://www.openbooksproject.org/OB_State_StudentData.aspx
Data provided by Oregon Department of Education based on the 2010-2011 school year.

Our students are thriving in a public school setting that's delivered to them using cutting-edge technology. One of our elementary school students, Hanami Froom, is a first grader who performs with the Oregon Symphony. You may have heard about her on KXL-FM last year, seen her on television, or heard her perform. She's a talented youngster who is able to hone her craft - and prepare for her future - in a public school that's tailored to her unique needs. And as of second semester this year, she now has an opportunity to participate in Juilliard eLearning, online arts courses developed by Connections Education for Juilliard, the internationally renowned music conservatory. Students in grades K through 12 from rural towns to major cities throughout Oregon will have the opportunity to study music - from home. Children from kindergarten through high school can gain a greater understanding of music through hands-on music activities and study of music repertoire, plus presentations and demonstrations by faculty, alumni, and students from the world-famous Juilliard School in New York City.

I recently talked to an ORCA parent who wanted to express her gratitude for what we have offered her family. This story is not about academics, but life. Her child came from a situation in which she was not engaged in school, had withdrawn from childhood activities and then attempted suicide due to bullying and a loss of hope for her future. After this event, the family heard of ORCA and enrolled. The student is now passing all high school classes and has even started talking about college. Although we are an educational institution, ORCA delivers more. We support the whole child through individualized lessons, one-on-one support from teachers, child welfare counseling and college/career support. Supporting the child as an individual is a strength of ORCA, yet requires the resources and staffing to make it happen. To this parent in particular, it has changed their lives.

And, our parents are satisfied with the public education option we're providing: ORCA surveyed our parents in February 2012. 97% of parents agree the curriculum is high quality, 94% would recommend the program to others and 95% said their children are satisfied with the program.

I invite each of you - and every member of the legislature - to visit with us to learn more about the public education we offer to students across Oregon. Most visitors are surprised at how innovative the model is and walk away with a new understanding of the need for this model.

Now that I have given you a snapshot of the programs we offer, and the students we serve, I want to explain why any funding cuts would put our school - and our students' futures - in jeopardy.

Under the current funding formula for charter schools, our school receives \$5800 per student. ORCA is a charter school by law and follows the rules and laws that all charters follow, including clear goals which must be met. To lower our public charter school's funding would result in us needing to reduce our services to students, making our ability to meet the accountability requirements very difficult.

Our school is a school like any other traditional school except our students and teachers are in different locations. This does not mean we have less costs but simply different costs. For example, just like in a traditional public school, personnel costs are the most significant cost drivers. This category combined with course materials and the technology necessary to deliver a robust and comprehensive public education account for around 70 percent of our expenditures. The way we deliver instruction is different, not necessarily less.

In high school, we are often the school of last resort. Over 40% of our students in high school enroll after 9th grade and come in with between 2-7 credits deficient. Many are at risk and have experienced less than ideal educational experiences previously. Our challenge, which takes resources, is to engage those students, help them to earn the credits they need and graduate. Often this is a student by student personalized learning program we develop to help them be successful. With reduced funds, this challenge becomes much greater and improvements toward meeting the governor's 40-40-20 Graduation Plan become unlikely.

We already are stretching the limited resources we receive to offer a wide variety of programs that our families have come to expect. . We are also held to an even higher standard: if we fail to meet students' and families' expectations, our school can close.

Cutting our public school's funding is unfair and further jeopardizes our student's futures. I hope you will abandon plans to cut our funding and instead will embrace a model of public education that already is doing more with less.

**Oregon Connections Academy
Fiscal Year 2013 Forecasted Expenses**

Online Course Only Expenses		
	Enrollment:	3,339
<u>Instruction:</u>		<u>Cost Per Student</u>
General Education Teachers (salaries, benefits, taxes and pension)	\$ 5,398,484	\$ 1,617
<u>Course Materials:</u>		
Tangible and Intangible Instructional Materials <i>May include items such as textbooks, novels, science kits and other tangible educational materials and online lesson content, lesson plans, Teachlet® tutorials and other intangible educational materials</i>	5,147,125	1,542
Total	\$ 10,545,609	\$ 3,159
Full-Time Virtual School Operation Expenses		
		<u>Cost Per Student</u>
Administration and Other Support Services (e.g., Administrative Compensation, Enrollment and Records Mgmt, HR Support, Staff Recruiting, EMO support)	\$ 2,670,606	\$ 800
Student Technology (e.g., EMS Annual License, ISP Fees, Loaned Hardship Student Tech, ORCA Owned Tech)	2,881,315	863
School Technology (e.g., Hardware/Software Employees, Phone, Internet)	86,353	26
Facilities and Office-related (e.g., Office Supplies, Rent, Utilities, Office Postage, Copiers, Maintenance & Repair)	132,010	40
Financial, Audit and Treasury Services (e.g., Acctg. & Regulatory Reporting, Treasury Services, Financial Audit, Banking Fees)	274,915	82
Staff Development and Travel (e.g., Staff Dev. & Travel, Education Resource Center, Conferences)	522,001	156
State Testing and Student Activities (e.g., Student Testing & Assessment, Graduation, Field Trips, Honor Society)	88,598	27
Board and Professional Services (Legal, Board Related Expenses, D&O Insurance, Dues)	45,652	14
Instructional Supplies (e.g., Curriculum Postage, School Curriculum Supplies)	213,329	64
Supplemental Instruction (e.g., Direct Course Instruct. Support, Sub Teacher Service, Other Curriculum)	91,054	27
Community Outreach (e.g., Outreach and Marketing Support Services)	239,912	72
Sponsoring/Resident District Fees	1,579,878	473
Total	\$ 8,825,622	\$ 2,644
Total Course and School Operation Expenses	\$ 19,371,231	\$ 5,803

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Fiscal Year 2013 Forecasted Expenses - Bar Chart

