



Testimony of Upstream Public Health to the
House Committee on Transportation & Economic Development
In support of HB 2979 & HB 2639
Heidi Guenin, Policy Manager – Transportation & Land Use

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Dear Chair McKeown and committee members,

Thank you for taking the time to hear testimony about the importance of improving youth access to transit across the state. Upstream Public Health is a public health policy research, development, and advocacy organization, and we work to create the physical, social, and economic environments where all Oregonians can thrive. In 2014, Upstream researched [and reported on the connections between chronic absence and health](#). During this research, we learned that transportation is the number one non-health factor that contributes to chronic absenteeism.

Oregon has one of the worst rates of chronic absenteeism in the country. In fact, more than one in five Oregon students miss a month or more of school each year. This number increases to one in three for students of color, students experiencing economic hardship, and students in special education. Students from low-income households are 50% more likely to be absent in high school than other students.

Oregon cannot meet its ambitious graduation goals, or eliminate the achievement gap, without addressing chronic absenteeism. Additionally, the less education an adult has, the more likely they are to smoke, have diabetes, and die prematurely of certain chronic conditions.

HB 2979 and HB 2639 are both important steps in reducing transportation barriers for youth – students can use free or reduced-price transit passes to access school and other opportunities in their communities, and improved transit service near schools will make transit a more reliable and accessible option. By supporting improved transit access for youth, the state has the opportunity to achieve multiple goals related to health, education, the environment, and ultimately, the economy, too. These benefits will directly extend to families through reduced financial and time costs of transportation. In addition, benefits will extend to the community as a whole through reduced air pollution, as youth are able to move around without driving or being chauffeured.

Every day that a student misses class is a lost learning opportunity that holds our youth back. This puts their future, and ours, at risk. Upstream supports both of these bills as part of the solution for keeping Oregon students in school.

Thank you for your time,

Heidi Guenin
Policy Manager, Transportation & Land Use