

To: Ways and Means Education Subcommittee Members
From: Maria Weer Executive Director Building Healthy Families
Date: March 14th, 2015
Re: House Bill 5016

Co-chairs Sen. Monroe and Rep. Komp and members of the committee,

My name is Maria Weer. I am the Executive Director of Building Healthy Families, a family support and education non-profit located in rural Northeastern Oregon. Our focus is on engaging and supporting children and families from cradle through career. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of House Bill 5016.

In addition to its physical beauty, the rural, frontier nature of Wallowa County draws many tourists and retirees to our community each year, creating the illusion of prosperity and economic vitality. However, it is this extreme geographic isolation that also creates a disproportionately high percentage of children and families in need. In an April 2014 study, Workforce Oregon reported Wallowa County as having a non-seasonally adjusted unemployment rate of 11.2% (compared to the state average of 6.9%), resulting in a high number of children and families that are economically disadvantaged. Further exacerbating the situation, is the limited access to human and social services, extra-curricular and employment opportunities due to limited funds and a minuscule population comparative to other Oregon Counties. Unfortunately, it is often our youngest residents that feel the greatest impact of this disparity.

As we both know, Oregon is in the bottom quarter of all states for access to pre-school for 4-year olds. This statistic is only increased for those kids from families below the 200% federal poverty level as is the majority of our Wallowa County Children. Despite this unfortunate “norm,” studies repeatedly show that there is no greater return on investment in learning than early childhood. In fact, research shows that early learning and preschool programs tremendously improve a child’s chance of being ready for kindergarten and achieving school success in 3rd grade. However, in our most rural regions, the limited number of pre-school slots available leave a majority of our highest risk children behind.

Right now, school districts and child care programs have no access to state funding. In our most rural regions, such as Wallowa County, these are often the only entities that could realistically begin provide services. At this point however, their budgets are already stretched so thin, that adding these opportunities is not a possibility. Building Healthy Families is a strong supporter of an additional investment of 5 million dollars over the biennium to continue Oregon’s Kindergarten Partnership & Innovation Fund. These moneys would provide grants to school districts, early learning hubs, and non-profits to build a seamless path from the early years to the early grades. In our rural, geographically isolated region of Northeastern Oregon this may be our next generations best chance of providing the early foundation needed for academic and life success.

Thank you for your time, and feel free to contact me with any additional questions,

Maria Weer
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