

Testimony in support of HB 3499

By Sara Garcia Gonzalez, Stand for Children Leader

March 30th, 2015

Members of House Education committee,

My name is Sara Garcia Gonzalez. I am the parent of a former English learner, a Stand for Children leader, and a member of the Reynolds budget advisory committee.

I am also the wife of a student who was born in the United States, who is first generation and from a family of farmworkers, who like millions of farmworkers, labor in the fields to harvest fruit consumed every day by the people of the United States and other countries. My husband got his medical assistant certificate in 2009, but to date he has not been able to find work in that field due in part to the economic collapse that affected our country in 2008.

While noting that a public education is key to the success of all students regardless of their ethnicity, in most cases, students who speak English as a second language have a difficult time pursuing competitive careers, because from kindergarten through high school graduation English language programs keep them away from core curriculum. Not only has this problem affected generations of students from the time my husband was in school, but it continues to plague children across Oregon.

On behalf of this community, my community, I encourage you to pass HB 3499 to achieve a better structure for ELLs and to meet the needs of students with different types of learning abilities. We need to set a benchmark goal of seven years for students learning English. We need to monitor who is being placed in ELL and for what reason, and if perhaps it's simply because the parents of the child speak another language at home.

This is a problem that affects not only the immediate families of these students, but rather is a social problem that gradually weakens our economy. Generations of brilliant students who should be at a competitive advantage for being bilingual are not offered the necessary tools for academic success.

Each individual has an experience, and mine is showing my community that there is strength in unity. I need the Oregon legislature to partner with me and my community to draft a new structure that will satisfy the unique needs of students who speak English as a second language.

The government would save millions of dollars if we strategically provide all students with a quality education, which means that we must adjust the services for the thousands of students from immigrant families who speak multiple languages.

On behalf of these children, our public school system must prioritize values like responsibility and honesty. Our public school system must question the way we use ELL funds and seek solutions to unacceptable graduation rates among a community with so much potential. Just as an example, this could look like investments in early education for each and every resident in Oregon.

As a volunteer and a mother embedded in my community, I speak on behalf of dozens of family's stories, but my own personal testimony also offers a glimpse in the urgency to address this issue at a statewide level.

When I enrolled my daughter in kindergarten a few years ago, I made a request to the school principal not to place her in the English language development program. I knew that students classified as English language learners are at a disadvantage academically, but the principal told me not to worry, that my daughter would not be at a disadvantage.

On a different occasion, I asked the school board and the superintendent from daughter's school district how they classify children as English learners. They answered that they classify students as English learners if the parents respond to a question by saying the student speaks another language other than English, which was frustrating to hear because my child is bilingual.

As my daughter was in ELD from kindergarten through second grade; I was able to see that the communication between school district and parents wasn't the ideal one. They didn't seem to have the staff to interpret or translate school policies and politics.

It is clear to me that school districts need more guidance and support on how to educate students who speak more than one language, or who are learning English. We need to see higher expectations statewide through the creation of achievable, effective and tested benchmarks that predict academic success. That is why I am urge you to support HB 3499.

Thank you,

Sara Garcia Gonzalez