



THE

CENTER FOR INTERCULTURAL ORGANIZING

700 N. Killingsworth | Portland, Oregon 97217 | (503) 287-4117 | www.interculturalorganizing.org

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Chair Doherty and Members of the House Education Committee,

For the record my name is Abdul Fofanah originally from Sierra Leone West Africa. I have resided in Portland, Oregon for over 15 years. I work at the Center for Intercultural Organizing as a Parent Organizer—working with underrepresented families to become empowered in getting involved in their children’s education and address barriers to their involvement within the schools. I want to start by thanking the legislators for the opportunity to share my story. My purpose for being here today is to urge you support and to vote yes on the House Bill 3499.

As an immigrant who came to this country to get a better life and education, English was not my first language so it was wonderful to be in an ELL Classroom in school. The ELL Class provided me the help and support I needed to adjust into the American school culture, to my reading and writing in English. In my country of origin, English is the national language and we spoke English at school, so I was not a new learner. The help I needed was mainly to adjust from speaking British-style English to American English. As I spent more time in the ELL class I was very proficient in English, and eventually became a teacher’s aide helping my classmate who needed much more help than I did. After 2 year of ELL first in Washington DC and then 2 more years at Jefferson High school, I moved to David Douglas High as a junior when my parents bought a home in South East Portland. Finally, during my senior year, my parents and I agreed that I was more comfortable in understanding and speaking American English and felt I no longer needed the ELL Class. I had felt this way for some time. My grades also reflected this outcome. The School however did not agree and insisted I must continue to take the class.

As I became socially accepted at school by my peers, I quickly learned that there is a stigma associated with being in ELL class and my friends began to provoke me. To them, being in ELL meant I was not as smart as everyone else. Being that I wanted to be socially accepted and wanted to fit in culturally, I was deeply affected by this and began to act out in class as a way of rebelling. This issue affected me not just socially but academically as well, and made it uncomfortable for me to be at the school. This experience stayed with me and began to make me look at myself differently until I was much older, and mature enough to understand that I was just as smart as everyone else.

Here we are in 2015, and as a Parent Organizer working with low income families we held a series of Listening Sessions to hear parents out. In our first listening session a