



*Oregon Connections Academy Parent Association (ORCAPA) represents a group comprised of Connections Academy's online schooling families and friends.*

30 March 2015

Dear Members of the Senate Committee on Education:

As the Oregon Connections Academy Parents Association (ORCAPA), we represent the roughly 4000 students and families enrolled in Oregon Connections Academy (ORCA). We encourage the committee to help parents and families be better informed regarding their choices in education. With regard to Senate Bill 709, this is best accomplished by deleting the proposed restrictions on the distribution of information contained within Sections 7 and 8.

As a state, it is important that we empower parents to make the best decisions possible for their children. As with any decision, the only way to do that is to provide them with relevant information. We realize that advertising may seem like a plebeian method for letting families know about their educational opportunities. That said, many families would not know about new products or services without advertising. It is for this reason, that private schools, our state universities, and other alternative educational opportunities advertise. No one would expect a family to choose their child's education based solely on marketing materials. However, advertising lets them to know what they should look into further. Additionally, with a school that has a statewide service territory, advertising is needed to let people in rural, or otherwise underserved communities know about the education options available to them.

Whether a school district or individual school chooses to market itself is a decision best left to that organization's administration. It is they who will be closest to the student body and community. It is they who will know what the needs of those groups and individuals are. And, it is they who can most accurately assess the amount or types of advertising needed maintain healthy educational opportunities within their community.

Specialized schools (such as charter schools, magnet schools, and technical programs) allow students who do not fit within the traditional educational model to thrive and succeed at school. These students don't fit the traditional model for a variety of reasons:

- these students may be interested in specialized areas;
- they may need to move faster or slower than their classmates;
- these students may have physical or emotional health issues that prevent them from fitting into their schools;
- the students may be being bullied in their current situation;
- they students may be pregnant;
- these students may need to work during the day to help support their families; or
- the students may just like the more personalized attention often afforded by these programs.

Whatever the reason, these schools are searching for a specialized student body--one who will fit their educational model. It is especially important that these specialized schools be allowed to advertise and find the students who can gain the most from their programs. In addition to a school's own interest in reaching a

broad spectrum of families, there is a societal need for them to be allowed to advertise. A key objection to specialized schools is the lack of broad community access to them. With advertising, schools can reach a wider audience, ensuring that the student body is not limited to a small, nepotistic, group of families.

As parents in Connections Academy, every member of our board has spoken with prospective families. These families sometimes come to us having heard about the school from other families. However, they also come to us having heard about the school from radio and television announcements, newspapers, internet advertising, and even events that the school participates in. With all of these prospective families, there is a thirst to find a school that will foster the best possible education for their child--and as current parents we are often told that the advertisement for this new option seemed like a lifeline. Among our board member families, the Baxters heard about ORCA from friends who were enrolled in the school, the Cousineau family found out about ORCA when researching homeschooling options for a friend online, the Conklin family heard a radio ad, and the Scarborough family received a mailed postcard. It is this diversity of methodologies that has allowed the school to grow into such a vibrant community. Without advertising many of our school's families would not have known about the opportunities that ORCA affords.

Families come to outside events or meetings with current parents and staff full of questions. Some of these conversations are short, answering just a few key questions the parent (and even student) has. Other times these conversations are much longer, even spanning multi-day phone and email conversations. Like any other life-changing decision, the choice to switch schools is not taken lightly by these families. Seeing an advertisement for the school was an important *first step*--but it is by no means the only step.

We appreciate the attention you are giving to this matter, and urge you to continue encouraging diverse school communities by removing Sections 7 and 8 from SB 709.

Sincerely,

ORCAPA Board Members:

*Anne Marie Gurney, Jessica Cousineau, Preston Baxter, Mark Scarborough, Lori Conklin*