

Chair Roblan, members of the committee, my name is Karen Belsey and I am the Administrator of the Opal School at the Portland Children's Museum in Portland. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

When the Oregon legislature established charter schools in 1999, it identified a clear intention in ORS 338.15:

“It is the intent of this chapter that new types of schools, called public charter schools, be created as a legitimate avenue for parents, educators and community members to take responsible risks to create new, innovative and more flexible ways of educating children within the public school system. The Legislative Assembly seeks to create an atmosphere in Oregon's public school system where research and development of new learning opportunities are actively pursued. The provisions of this chapter should be interpreted liberally to support the goals of this section and to advance a renewed commitment by this state to the mission, goals and diversity of public education. It is the intent that public charter schools may serve as models and catalysts for the improvement of other public schools and the public school system. The goals of public charter schools shall be to:

- (1) Increase student learning and achievement;
- (2) Increase choices of learning opportunities for students;
- (3) Better meet individual student academic needs and interests;
- (4) Build stronger working relationships among educators, parents and other community members;
- (5) Encourage the use of different and innovative learning methods;
- (6) Provide opportunities in small learning environments for flexibility and innovation, which may be applied, if proven effective, to other public schools;
- (7) Create new professional opportunities for teachers;
- (8) Establish additional forms of accountability for schools; and
- (9) Create innovative measurement tools."

Shortly thereafter, Opal School opened its doors. I'm pleased to tell you today that all of those nine goals have been vigorously pursued at Opal. I heartily encourage you to come visit our school or the local charter school in your district to see these goals in action.

Opal is a small school with a big mission: It aims to strengthen public education by provoking fresh ideas regarding environments where creativity, curiosity, and the wonder of learning thrive. That work begins in the classroom, where teacher-researchers identify children's natural learning strategies and the conditions that support their intellectual, social-emotional, and creative development. We collaborate with one another, children, and families to understand children's thinking and to bring those ideas to a world that benefits from their unique perspectives. Because Opal teachers listen attentively to children, we know that children are complete, valuable citizens with important contributions **now** – that they don't only exist in a state of becoming, to be valued once they're adults. With the hoped for and anticipated passage of SB 820, Opal School is well situated to serve greater numbers of historically underserved students and bring a powerful model of education to them so they are able to be valued for the unique gifts, perspectives, knowledge, experience and curiosity they bring to the classroom.

The research being conducted on an ongoing basis in Opal School classrooms not only serves Opal students – it is a treasured professional development resource utilized by

teachers, schools, and districts. Opal hosts workshops, symposia, and study groups; produces videos and books; and presents at conferences. We work closely with neighboring schools and districts to support their work meeting the needs of children. Teachers, administrators, and superintendents regularly tour Opal School and observe classes to consider the implications to their programs. During just this school year, more than 1000 educators will attend significant presentations by Opal teachers that illuminate classroom stories in ways that extend participants ideas regarding what is possible in schools.

This service to the larger profession, both mission driven and identified as a central goal in the charter legislation, comes in addition to the same workload that all teachers assume: Opal School teachers create curriculum, assess learning, steward student development, and coordinate groups of children while creating these professional development experiences for colleagues. Adding to a teacher's job description in this way requires sophisticated expertise and long hours. Incredibly, Opal teachers do this work at a fraction of the salary of their district peers: earning between \$35,000 and \$39,000 a year and receiving lesser benefit packages than these peers. And while we are unable to pay our teachers like their public school

colleagues, as charter schools we do participate in the PERS system as we should. This employer payment of 20.2%, in addition to the 6% Individual Account Program from teachers, comes at considerable cost to our teachers in the immediate term. Too often it causes them to leave. Teachers who have left Opal report that their take home pay nearly doubles when they move to District operated schools.

While Opal's service to the larger profession has been recognized and supported through grants, such awards cannot provide the stability necessary to increase wages. Passing SB 819 will result in a group of Oregonians, who provide a significant public service, receiving a living wage - something which teachers, students, and educators state-wide will benefit from.

This bill is essential for us to be able to continue to achieve the goals set out for us by the state. I urge you to pass SB 819 and SB 820 so that students and the broader education community can fully benefit from what Opal - and many charter schools - have to offer.

Thank you.

