

Senate Education Committee
April 7, 2015
Testimony on SB 819 & SB 820

My name is Zalika Gardner

I've been in education a long time:

I've had the privilege of teaching young children in public, private and charter schools as well as adults in the MAT program at Lewis and Clark. I've been facilitating diversity conversations for the last 12 years, working with families and staff as we all learn how to authentically talk about race.

In the skin I'm in the concepts of access, equity and justice have been in my conscious world and conversation for as long as I can remember. My white mother and black father chose to get married in 1968 in Oregon, so I guess I was born to take on challenges...

I will say that standing here today is one of those big challenges for a shy introvert who loves nothing more than when we all get along!

But here's what I know - none of the good stuff comes by being comfortable. Words like access, equity and justice sound noble and inspiring, but actually, the path is uncomfortable and the challenges are deep and personal.

I come to this place having been offered many privileges afforded by my educated, empowered, embattled and determined Mom and Dad. They knew choice was their right and they carefully charted a path for my education.

Because they did, I went to private college and an Ivy League graduate school. I've in turn taught in both an exclusive private school and a private MAT program. I've been offered the codes and language of power. My choice at this moment in my life is to use that privilege, those powerful points of access, to make change. Every single child is a treasure and our best opportunity for a strong profitable future. Every single one. The narrative we tell however is more about risks, worries, and struggles. I am a co-founder of a K-5 charter school with a mission to close the racial achievement and opportunity gaps for students in Portland. A mission that includes changing the narrative from angry, dangerous and at risk to terms like competent, capable and brilliant.

KairosPDX is one push of many to offer possibilities in education. We have inherited a system that has long created paths through access to privilege and power. Education is no exception to that rule. In order to **see** change there actually has to **be** change and our charter is an important manifestation of the optimism and dedication of educators who still believe education is our best lever for change.

I am here today, however, not to share about Kairos per se, but to provide a context for why our ability to meet our mission is so intertwined with the bills before you today.

I'm here because at the heart of both 819 and 820 is equity.

Because equity is one of those words that people are throwing around left and right. I want to define the concept for our shared understanding today. Equity does not mean we all now get the same. Indeed if we all now get the same we simply perpetuate the inequities that exist.

Equity is an incredibly difficult process of sharing power and shifting injustice.

Equity is powerful and uncomfortable. It requires those that have to give to those that don't. Now, while everyone wants to be that person who will give, very few of us actually act on this conviction. Equity is hard. It requires we grapple with our privilege and give up the myth that we have all "earned" those resources independent of established systems of support. It requires we endure the frustration of interest convergence when our desire to help those "under-resourced" collides with our interest in holding our own resources for ourselves. Giving until it hurts requires a serious commitment to the conflict and discomfort equity requires.

The pursuit of equity is made even more intense in the situation we are in in Oregon education where there are not enough resources for anybody! Our public schools do not have enough. It is painful to give of resources when you are already strapped. It is painful to work to right a ship that, while unruly and tough to sail, ultimately leans in your favor.

That is however exactly what we are asking your help to do. We are asking for your help to help right the ship, to lead with the laws in the time honored tradition of social justice fighters before us. Children who go to charter schools are afforded \$5000 less than their counterparts at other public schools. They are not worth less, not less expensive to educate, not less important or less valued but the law as written treats them as though they are. We can change that.

Changing this determination - worth less to worth same - is less radical than the idea we have already embraced that some children are actually more expensive to educate. In many instances equity demands that some be provided more. I have seen first hand the vast differences in what is offered to children based on the resources their families are able to bring to the table. Please help us rectify this kind of inequity of funding allocation in our public school system.

Finally, our school along with many others, understand the necessity of a diverse student body in equipping children for the realities of our global society. We understand that an excellent education must necessarily include multiple perspectives and cultural competency. We along with other schools carry this value

against a backdrop of historical exclusion practices leaving our communities racially segregated and our communities of color small and spread out. Lets take the African- American community. In the 2013 census we were 2% of the total population. If, and this is a big if, if we are able to somehow neutralize generations of active disenfranchisement and debilitating disillusionment and create access points for our lottery, if the lottery is left to chance we will have 2 African American students for every hundred students.

Have you ever been 2 of a hundred? I would hazard a guess that the majority of people of color in the room know that feeling and know the difficulties of forming a strong racial identity against a backdrop of whiteness. My oldest son and my daughter know that world well. Their experience is a piece of what propels me to believe we can create schools and communities with intentional pedagogies, excellent education and a positive cultural environment that both supports and equips children to be change agents as we recover from the trauma of racism. Weighting our lottery allows us to push back on probability and provide a community of support and excellence for all of our kids. Weighting our lottery allows us to address the historic disenfranchisement of children and families by race, culture, poverty and language. SB 820 acknowledges that when taking on the work of combating privilege, equity does mean some children deserve more.

Finally, KairosPDX is a willing and engaged participant in the work to turn around the school experience and outcomes for our children of color. We are on mission with our district and indeed partners in some ways as we have teachers joining us from district schools to learn together about new ideas and methodologies around culturally relevant practice. We are a baby school but we are full of optimism and innovative energy. But let me be real. We cannot fulfill our potential without the baseline financial equity and the ability to right the systemic inequity of access. We need you in order to be who we are. But isn't that the way all of humanity works really...?

Thank you.

Thank you.