

April 7, 2014 5

Public Testimony in support of SB 819 and SB 820

Chair Roblan, members of the committee, my name is Tara O'Neil and I am the Director of The Emerson School, a public charter school in Portland, OR. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

The Emerson School is a K-5 charter school located in downtown Portland. We are in our 12<sup>th</sup> year of operation, and have received the highest rating on the Oregon Report Card every year we've been rated. Our students use the outside downtown community as an extension of their classrooms for their project-based studies, and incorporate service learning in the community with each project. We pay retail rental rates for our downtown Portland location, and parents must pay to park on city streets to pick up and drop off students at our public school. I have been the director of this charter school for twelve years.

We are here today to talk about funding equity and enrollment equity for Oregon's public charter school students, and ask for your support for Senate Bills 819 and 820. (#2) Charter schools are an integral part of the web of support for our public school students. We are part of the same public education system, working with the same students and the same achievement standards as our host districts' schools. Yet as a recent EcoNorthwest study from the Chalkboard Project found, we are doing this with an average of 58% of the funding of our district counterparts.

(#3) To explain where the funding disparity comes from, I reference the ECONorthwest study of Charter School Funding released in March of this year. The study was commissioned by the Chalkboard Project to shed light on the question of how charter school funding compares with that of their district counterparts. Data for the study was taken from 2012-2013 Oregon Department of Education reports.

(#4) Their study revealed a significant funding deficit for charter school students when compared to students attending district-run schools. This slide is taken directly from the report, and shows overall per student funding for charter schools is about half that of district-run schools. Where does that funding go?

(#5) Looking at this funding disparity, we see that there are a number of streams of revenue that feed into a District-run school: state, federal, local, grants, and others. Of those streams, just one, the State School Fund Grant, is required to be passed on to the charter schools. As those funds are passed through the district, a portion is retained there – 20% for charter students in grades k-8, and 5% for charter students in grades 9-12. So charter school students receive 80 or 95% of one funding stream only. With very few exceptions, the other funding streams feed district schools only, and are not passed through to the charter school students. Though school districts have the option of passing on additional funds to charter schools, very few do and there is little incentive to do so.

The result of this, according to the ECONorthwest study, (#6) is that charter school students are receiving 42% less, on average about \$5,000, less funding PER STUDENT per year than their district school counterparts. To put numbers on it from charter schools in my district, (#7) in 2013-2014, the state spent about \$10,250 per student in public funding as reported in the annual report card. K-8 charter schools in my district only received an average of \$5,200 per student, and high schools an average of \$6,185 per student. That is just over 50% and 60% of the average state per pupil spending, respectively.

(#8) What Senate Bill 819 would do is ensure 95% of all state and local funding (except facilities and Special Ed funding) would pass through to charter school students, leaving a 5% administrative fee in the sponsoring districts.

What Senate Bill 819 would do for charter school students is provide equity of opportunity; (#9) opportunity for classroom supplies and materials, instructional supports, retention of qualified staff, safe and clean facilities, access to transportation, and more. (#10) This would require no new funding from the legislature, and would shift less than 1%, about 0.7%, of the funding from the district-run school students to the charter school students.

In my district, there are 9 district-sponsored and 2 state-sponsored charter schools. The district supports a charter schools office, with two dedicated staff who serve to oversee, evaluate, and help navigate district resources for its charter schools. It is an effective model, and fosters communication between the district and its charter schools. From the 11 charter schools, the district will retain over \$2,100,000 in state school funding this year. If left with a flat 5% administrative fee, that amount would be \$750,800. That is nearly my school's entire operating budget, including 10 staff, and would not impact the district's ability to maintain the charter schools office for oversight and evaluation.

For all the difference it would make to the charter school students, SB 819 would still not bring them up to the funding status of their district peers, but it would be a meaningful step in the right direction, in paring down the \$5,000 per student funding disparity for our charter school students.

(#11) SB 819 would apply to students attending independent charter schools only, it would not include virtual charter schools or charter districts (which are already fully funded). In total, this would be a step toward funding equity for about 16,000 public school students in Oregon.

While none of Oregon's students may have the full funding the QEM recommends, they should all have access to the same base rate of funding, no matter which public school they attend. (#12) Our charter school students are as valuable, (#13) as precious, and (#14) as worthy of our public investment as students in district-run schools. It's time to end the inequity. (#14) We urge your support for SB 819.

Thank you for your time today.

Tara O'Neil  
11618 SW 39<sup>th</sup> Ave  
Portland, OR 97219  
[tara@emersonschool.org](mailto:tara@emersonschool.org)