



**Testimony Before the
Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education regarding
Support for HB 5024
Presented by Dr. Mark Fischl
on behalf of the Oregon Medical Association
April 15, 2015**

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Dr. Mark Fischl and I am a member of the Board of Trustees and Executive Committee at the Oregon Medical Association. I am an internist practicing in Salem.

The OMA urges your support for full funding of the School of Medicine and the Office of Rural Health at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU). Not funding these programs would negatively impact health care education programs that are vital to Oregonians and would only further exacerbates our state's workforce shortage.

OHSU ranks 10th in the nation in terms of retaining medical students (46% of OHSU residents and fellows remain in Oregon to practice) and its programs in primary care, family medicine and rural medicine, ranked among the best in the nation, continue to attract students from all over the nation. Oregon's investment in medical education has allowed Oregon to maintain a higher retention rate than the national average and to slowly grow the physician workforce. Without the continued investment from the state to maintain these programs, Oregon's physician workforce is at risk- both to be trained in Oregon and to remain in Oregon.

Investing in tomorrow's medical doctors enables the OHSU School of Medicine to keep tuition rates steady and helps lower overall student debt. Making medical school education attainable to every Oregon resident and attracting students from other states is critical to growing Oregon's physician workforce and ensuring health care access to all Oregonians.

According to the Association of American Medical Colleges 2014 Graduation Questionnaire, medical students face an average medical school debt of \$178,046. Nearly 95 percent of OHSU graduates have debt, and pressure to pay off that debt discourages physicians from practicing in rural and underserved areas where reimbursement rates are lower. Key investments by the Oregon Legislature, such as the Oregon Rural Scholars Program, are showing promise- to date, the Rural Scholars Program has funded 5 medical students who have committed to practice in rural and underserved areas upon graduation.

We have learned that none of those medical students could be here today, not because they don't strongly support the program, but because they all have a test this morning. A few of them submitted written testimony and I'd like to read one excerpt from that testimony with you this morning. Alex Polston, a future family medicine physician from Banks, Oregon wrote:

"My background is fairly representative of the struggles many families face in small town Oregon. My mom was a single parent taking care of my older brother and I. Perhaps not surprising to you is that economics is a struggle in rural communities and I've personally experienced the host of problems poverty brings.

I knew I wanted to practice in a rural community like the one I grew up in. I applied to rural track programs around the country and I was offered many scholarships at places I was accepted. Despite wanting to attend OHSU as my first choice school, my wife and I made the decision to go where I could get the best education with lowest debt burden. Receiving this scholarship before I made my final decision of where to attend was the single biggest factor in my decision to stay in Oregon and attend OHSU.

Understanding and loving rural life is an important factor in my decision to be a Scholar for a Healthy Oregon. It allows rural people to get the education to go back to serve rural communities. I do not have to worry about finding a job in a specialty that can pay off my debt. I can practice where there is the most need.

I sincerely hope that this funding source persists for future classes, as I believe this is a vital investment in our State's future. Thank you for support, it has changed my life and the lives of many others. "

This is just one story to illustrate how important this program is. The OHSU Scholars for a Health Oregon Initiative not only helps provides an incentive for future physicians to stay in Oregon for medical school but ensures these students can and requires they will practice in a rural or underserved Oregon community when they complete their education. This program is good for medical students, OHSU, and the State of Oregon. However, this can only happen with continued funds from the Legislature in addition to other rural incentive programs.

Recruiting and retaining Oregon-trained physicians requires a commitment to excellence in education that reflects today's health care environment. OHSU was one of eleven medical schools to receive a grant from the American Medical Association aimed at closing the gap between how medical students are trained and how health care is delivered. The OHSU Curriculum Transformation Initiative is better preparing today's medical student to practice as part of a team in a health care landscape shaped by genetics, health care reform and technology. OHSU needs the legislature's continued investment in it as the only state public academic health institution to ensure it remains one of the nation's top medical schools. We cannot afford to waver in our state's commitment to health care education.

I would like to thank you once again for the opportunity to address the committee regarding this very important topic and I'm happy to answer any questions.

The Oregon Medical Association serves and supports over 8,200 physicians, physician assistants and student members in their efforts to improve the health of all Oregonians. Additional information can be found at www.theOMA.org.