

Greater Albany Public School District 8J

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Dear Chair Doherty and House Education Committee,

I am writing to encourage the passage of SB 321 to decrease the compulsory school age from seven to six years of age. With a background in human development—early childhood studies, and as a former teacher and principal with an unwavering commitment to meeting the needs of our youngest children, I earnestly request that this bill be seen as one more tool that will help educators meet the needs of our youngest.

Currently, our school attendance law is incongruent with our State values, messages, and initiatives. In addition, our current system deviates from important findings which show connections between attendance and achievement.

As examples:

- Our current law supports schools and truancy officers to intervene only when a five year old has enrolled and started school but not prior.
- SB 44 directed the Oregon Department of Education to form the Full-Day Kindergarten Implementation Committee and to make a policy recommendation during the 2011 Oregon Legislative Assembly. By a unanimous vote, the Committee recommended mandating full-day kindergarten for all Oregon public school students beginning in the 2015-2016 school year.
- Our Early Learning Hubs are charged with helping students get the resources and supports they need to be ready to enter kindergarten. Poverty, exposure to violence, lack of pre-school experiences, and lack of access to medical care, all impact school attendance.
- OEIB champions what we know—early literacy is one of the greatest predictors of lifelong success and yet nearly one third of Oregon third graders are not reading proficiently by third grade. Students reading above grade level in the third grade, are twice as likely to graduate high school and three times as likely to go on to college. (Being on track by third grade starts in kindergarten and earlier.)

Powerful points from referenced sources:

- Nationally, over 11 percent of children in kindergarten and almost nine percent in first grade are chronically absent.*
- Chronic absentees in kindergarten have the lowest academic performance in first grade.*
- Poor children who were chronic absentees in kindergarten had the lowest performance in reading and math in fifth grade.*
- Rather than blaming children, we want to broaden awareness that missing extended periods of school could be an early sign of distress in school, community or home that could respond to appropriate early intervention. Moreover, when children are 5, 6 or 7 years of age, they are not likely to be absent from school without their parents' knowledge. *
- By working together to ensure all children attend school consistently, schools and communities make it more possible for teachers to teach and children to learn. School attendance reflects the degree to which schools, communities and families adequately address the needs of young children.*

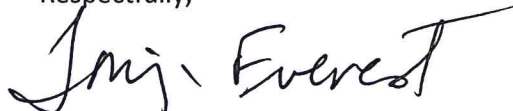
- Students with low attendance in both Pre-K and K often continue to have low attendance, are more likely to be retained by grade 3 and on average have lower academic outcomes than peers with better attendance.+
- Attendance in the early grades is critical to sustaining the school readiness skills that preschool or Head Start programs can help children to develop. The report found that students who arrived at school academically ready to learn— but then missed 10 percent of their kindergarten and first grade years—scored an average of 60 points below similar students with good attendance on third-grade reading tests. #
- Missing school in the early grades has a more powerful influence on literacy development for low-income students than it does for their more affluent peers. ^

Finally, I want to share that I have first-hand experience regarding the ability to help kindergarten children get on track and stay on track. As one example, a kindergarten student at Oak Elementary, while I was principal, was significantly behind her peers from the first day of school. Early on, our data showed that her exceptional kindergarten teacher and our system of additional supports was failing to help her make the accelerated growth she needed. We partnered with the parents, who agreed to make sure that their daughter was at school all-day, everyday even though we technically only offered a half-day kindergarten program. If the parents had not been committed to making sure their daughter came to school every day, we would not have been able to help her exit kindergarten on-track, a result that helped her stay on-grade level throughout my tenure. What if these parents had not felt school was so important that their child needed to be at school every day? What if these parents had recognized that their daughter was developmentally behind her peers and had decided to “wait and see” if another year of maturity was all she needed before enrolling her in kindergarten?

I know that education for the very young is possible, defensible, and results achievement outcomes that will last a lifetime. Behaviors and patterns are set early. If a child misses 17 days of kindergarten (10% of the year as defined as chronically absent) and continues that pattern, by the time the child reached tenth grade, he/she would miss the equivalent of a full school year.

Please support SB 321 and give educators one more powerful message and tool, helping us communicate the opportunities and importance of early childhood education.

Respectfully,



Tonja Everest
Assistant Superintendent
Greater Albany Public School District

Referenced sources:

- *National Center for Children in Poverty Report: Present, Engaged, and Accounted For The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades , Hedy N. Chang and Mariajosé Romero, September 2008
- +Connolly, Faith and Olson, Linda S., *Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools’ Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten*, Baltimore Education Research Consortium, Baltimore, Md., March 2012.
- #*Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Association with Student Characteristics, School Readiness and Third Grade Outcomes*, Applied Survey Research, May 2011.
- ^Ready, Douglas D., *Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development, The Differential Effects of School Exposure*, Sociology of Education, October 2010.