



OREGON HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES: EDUCATION COMMITTEE TESTIMONY

5-27-15

by Mark Langseth, President & CEO, "I Have a Dream" Oregon

Chair Doherty, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. As Rob mentioned, my name is Mark Langseth, and I am President and CEO of "I Have a Dream" Oregon. "I Have a Dream's" mission is "to empower students from low-income communities to thrive in school, college and career." We were founded in Oregon in 1990, so this year marks a quarter century of doubling, or even tripling, high school graduation and college participation rates for our low-income student "Dreamers."

Just under two years ago, the Oregon legislature was lauded all over the country for forging a "Grand Bargain" on your biennial budget. I want to suggest to you today that nothing short of another "Grand Bargain" - this time between schools and communities - is required if we are to change the trajectory for low-income students throughout our great state. I believe that robust discussion about Senate Bill 214 is one important step toward that end, and I am pleased to be part of this process.

At "I Have a Dream" Oregon, we believe that this new Grand Bargain between communities and schools must have three fundamental elements:

- 1) redefinition of the P-12 education "system" to encompass both schools and communities;
- 2) much clearer roles for schools and communities within this expanded "system;" and
- 3) a great degree of intentionality about how schools and communities are funded under this expanded system.

Regarding redefinition of the P-12 system to encompass both communities and schools, we as a state and nation have been strong on rhetoric around "it takes a village," but this rhetoric has not translated into long-term, comprehensive, sustainable local models where schools and communities are working in highly strategic ways and where outcomes for our lowest-income kids are improving.

Regarding clearer roles for schools and communities, both in dialogue and in practice, we have mostly defaulted to asking low-income schools to bear virtually all responsibility - both for delivering academic results AND for addressing poverty-related barriers to student achievement, regardless of how large those poverty-related barriers loom. In this new Grand Bargain, we

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suggest that communities must take primary responsibility for lowering these student and family, poverty-related barriers, and allow schools to more fully focus on teacher effectiveness and classroom outcomes.

Let me offer a quick local example - from the Rockwood neighborhood in East Portland - of how this new Grand Bargain might work on the ground. Based at Alder Elementary School, where over 95% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, "I Have a Dream," along with the Reynolds School District, is helping lead a innovative school-community demonstration project that now has over 70 - yes 70 - community partners working together to help lower poverty-related student and family barriers. Examples include a major family stability and housing partnership with Home Forward and Human Solutions, collaboration with multiple mentoring organizations to provide over 350 kids with adult role models, major intervention in early reading with organizations like SMART and the Children's Book Bank, and in Fall 2015, the launch of a no-fee Montessori pre-school classroom at Alder. Plus dozens of organizations providing coordinated after-school and summer programming. A local college or university also adopts each grade level, including annual half-day to full-day campus visits each spring. Think about that - if you're at Alder Elementary School for six years - K-5 - you will have visited six college campuses before you're in 6th grade!

The idea behind this model is that we, as a community, can do a much better job of leveraging and aligning our resources and can do a much better job of working in more strategic ways with schools to achieve real results. And, though still early in its implementation, we now have three pieces of evidence that this demonstration project at Alder is getting results:

- 1) Alder Elementary, even with four Principal transitions over the past four years, is now the fastest improving elementary school in the Reynolds School District.
- 2) Reading proficiency rates at Alder have doubled in the last two years, and math proficiency rates have tripled.
- 3) Our family stability and housing supports also seem to be working, with an 80% increase in year-over-year retention rates for Alder students transitioning from Alder's feeder middle schools to Reynolds High School.

Finally, a quick couple comments on how we might fund this new system of schools and communities working together in highly integrated, strategic partnerships like those based at Alder Elementary. Interestingly, I think the path that SB214 has taken during this session is telling. That is, in a state where funding for schools is very near the bottom nationally, it makes sense that Oregon education leaders are, first and foremost, committed to retaining current and growing new funding for schools.

Our operating assumption at "I Have a Dream" Oregon is that the vast majority of school teachers, staff and administrators are capable of excellence, but in our experience working with schools which have at least 80% poverty rates - family and student barriers related to poverty simply overwhelm most teacher's and most school's capacity to deliver educational results. Again, we believe that lowering these barriers should be the primary responsibility of communities, not schools. Finding creative ways to fund this new "Grand Bargain" between communities and schools without undermining funding for schools is obviously a key challenge. I look forward to continuing that discussion with you in the future.

Thank you, and I am happy to take questions.