

From the Desk of Representative Mark Johnson



Senate approval of opt-out bill shows leadership vacuum on education: Editorial Agenda 2015

*From the desk of
Julie Parnell*

Screen Shot 2015-06-11 at 11.46.36 AM.png

A screen shot shows the vote breakdown of those voting for HB2655 (names in green) and those voting against it (names in red). *(Screen shot)*

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To those who need proof that Oregon suffers from a leadership vacuum on education, we offer the sucking sound that emanated from the state Senate Thursday as spine after spine disappeared.

All but six Oregon senators **voted in favor of a bill** that not only undermines the state's push for higher standards, but also could cost Oregon's poorest schools millions of dollars in badly needed federal funding. Instead, the chamber bowed to the teachers' union by overwhelmingly passing **House Bill 2655**, which allows parents to opt their students out of statewide standardized testing for any reason at all. The bill also requires school districts to send notices to parents twice a year about the test along with access to an opt-out form, practically inviting families to join the anti-testing rebellion.

Why the backlash? The surge reflects Oregon's switch this year to the tougher Smarter Balanced exam, which is designed to measure how well schools are teaching students to the Common Core standards adopted by Oregon in 2010. In addition, the tests eventually will be used for school report cards and as a factor in teacher evaluations, a provision that has generated **immense pushback from the Oregon Education Association**.

Although promoted as a student's "bill of rights," the Senate's approval of HB2655 is a win for the OEA, which can claim the mantle as the de facto leader in Oregon education. But make no mistake: Students, who have been shortchanged for years by low investment coupled with even lower expectations, are the ones who will continue to pay the price for an education policy that pursues the path of least resistance.

Senators approved the bill even after the U.S. Department of Education sent a **pointed email** and letter to Oregon officials explaining how funding could be affected if the state fails to meet standardized testing requirements that at least 95 percent of students take the exam. The tests rely on such



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a large showing in order to provide a reliable, accurate picture of how well schools are teaching grade-level material and educating low-income and minority populations in particular. And Oregon's bill goes much farther than most other states in its broad exemptions and proactive notice requirements.

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As **The Oregonian/OregonLive's Betsy Hammond** reported this week, Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education Deborah Delisle wrote in an email that the bill "increases the likelihood that Oregon will not meet its obligations under the law and incur enforcement action."

That enforcement action likely would include withholding or restricting some of the \$140 million in Title I funds that go to Oregon's high-poverty schools. Those funds, among the \$325 million the federal government sends Oregon each year, currently pay for desperately needed staff and programs across the state, including a teacher and assistant for a 30-student preschool program at **Hoover Elementary School** in Salem; a counselor for students at **Astor K-8** in North Portland; and a literacy coordinator for struggling readers at **Metzger Elementary School** in Tigard. More than half the students at all three schools qualify for free or reduced lunches.

In contrast, the bill satisfies the calls coming from the opt-out supporters at schools such as **Lake Oswego High School** and **Lincoln High School**, with a modest 8 percent and 10.6 percent free or reduced lunch populations, respectively.

Are Oregon legislators willing to kiss those funds away based on fears and anxiety over the first year bumps of administering a new test? Should legislators really let the testing tantrums by families at higher-income schools translate into fewer resources for the state's poorest students? Are we satisfied that Oregon graduates **spend extra time and money taking remedial classes in college** for material they should have learned in high school?

It's fantasy to believe that this bill will do anything but increase the opt-out rate, which is already at 5 percent statewide thanks to the wide latitude with which districts approved exemptions this year. And it's foolish to bank on this being a bluff. The federal government already showed its willingness to restrict funds with its decision last year **forcing Washington state to set aside \$40 million** for tutoring and transportation after state legislators there passed a bill making test scores an optional, rather than required, factor in teacher evaluations.

Oregonian editorials

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Interestingly, in her recent "Underachieving Oregon" series on education, Hammond identified **strong leadership as a critical factor** in helping three states push through reforms in education, despite considerable opposition and foot-dragging. But in Oregon, who can offer that leadership? With former Gov. John Kitzhaber's resignation amidst an ongoing influence-peddling investigation, the **expected dissolution of his Oregon Education Investment Board** and the impending **retirement of Deputy Superintendent Rob Saxton**, Oregon is drifting.

Give credit to the six senators who stood firm against the anti-testing fervor: Sens. Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day, Mark Hass, D-Beaverton, Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, Rod Monroe, D-Portland and Chuck Thomsen, R-Hood River.

Now, the amended bill goes back to the House, where it originated, for approval. If legislators there fail to turn it back, Gov. Kate Brown will face a high-stakes test of her own.

- The Oregonian/OregonLive editorial board

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