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Summary:

In 2011 the Oregon legislature enacted an open enrollment system giving public school students more opportunities to attend schools outside of their own ZIP code, including online schools. The legislature needs to act this year or open enrollment will end, leaving many Oregon families without the choices they want and need for their children's education.

Word Count 675

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Oregon Legislature Should Continue Open Enrollment in Public Schools

By **Bobbie Jager**

This week marks National School Choice Week, and states across the nation have much to celebrate. In the past decade, choice advocates across the political spectrum have worked to pass legislation including full funding for online and charter schools, education savings accounts, scholarship tax credits for children with disabilities, and open enrollment, which allows children to register freely beyond school district borders. School choice advocates in states like Indiana, Colorado, and Florida are also working to break down the walls between the K-12 education system and higher education so students not only earn a high school diploma, but are well on their way to earning an associate's degree.

When our state decided to create a Common School Fund, it was with the belief that a successful society was dependent upon having a skilled and educated citizenry, and that it was in the public's interest to pay for public education. But the Common School Fund was merely a funding mechanism. It was agnostic on the delivery mechanism.

In today's society, we expect customization and personalization in every aspect of our life. Have you considered that maybe our education system is failing not because we lack funding, but, rather, because we're still relying on a one-size-fits-all system for 550,000 students with little consideration for the needs of the individual student? Often, Oregon politicians talk about strengthening people's rights to freely make choices about their lives, yet when it comes to school choice, families in Oregon are severely restricted. The resistance to school choice by education leaders in Oregon isn't limited to simply expanding new options. Unfortunately, there is a constant effort to undo the few choice options available to Oregon families.

In 2011, a bipartisan Oregon legislature successfully increased options by expanding enrollment caps for online schools, creating a modified open enrollment option, and allowing colleges and universities to act as charter sponsors. Once caps were lifted, more Oregon students and their families chose online schooling. In turn, more public schools made online schooling an offering to stay competitive with their public charter school counterparts. The cap, however, is artificial. We should do away with it altogether and let parents have full access to that option.



When Oregon enacted open enrollment, hundreds of families across the state made the decision to leave their local school district for one that better suited the needs of their child. Unless the legislature acts in 2016, that choice will expire. Living in such a progressive state, doesn't it make sense that we would continue to expand choices for parents instead of limit them?

Progressive Democrats from around the nation are moving in this direction. For example, former California Senate President Gloria Romero, a Democrat and an educator, passed the nation's first parent trigger law. The law empowers parents whose children attend public schools that are in the bottom 20 percent of California's system with one of three choices: implement a turn-around model with the district and new staff, transition the school into a charter school, or vote to shut the school down. Gloria understood empowering parents with choices would help children escape failing schools.

As a mother of 13 children, I quickly learned not every child fits into the same educational "box." My children have attended public schools, including charter schools, private schools, experienced home schooling, and attended international schools when my family was stationed in Saudi Arabia. My kids fill the spectrum from special needs to children identified as talented and gifted. To assume each child is well-served by the exact same educational delivery formula is a recipe for disaster. We now see the results of that thinking in Oregon's poor graduation rates.

My message to Oregon legislators is to look at what Democrats in other states are doing to end inequality in their education systems. Their efforts are based on choice and empowering parents to make necessary changes. Let's end our practice of tying a child's educational future to their ZIP code and their income. It's time to give all Oregon school children the choice for a better future.

Bobbie Jager is the executive director of Building Excellent Schools Together (BEST), a nonpartisan organization committed to parent empowerment and increasing the options for education delivery in our public school system. She was named Oregon Mother of the Year in 2012. Ms. Jager is a guest contributor for Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research organization.

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