

HB 4091 Testimony 2/8/16

Metro East Web Academy's Position represented by CEO/Principal - Dr. David L. Gray, Ph.D.

Chairperson and Committee Members,

I am here representing Metro East Web Academy, a virtual charter school sponsored by Gresham Barlow School District. We currently have approximately 470 full and part time students enrolled from 12 school districts in the east Portland Metro area. Our staff is comprised of 1 full-time and 2 part-time administrators, 10 support staff and 12 teachers.

Thank you for hearing my testimony and position on the current version of HB 4091. Although the bill in its current form, does not impact Metro East Web Academy as more than 50% of our students come from our sponsoring district, in any given year, that percentage changes. Two years ago, more than 50% of our students came from outside our sponsoring district.

First of all, we support changing the word "plan" to "requirement" for all of the subsections of Section 4 as amended in the -3 version of this HB. We have always operated by these standards. We are accredited by AdvancED as are most brick and mortar schools in the state, we receive an annual evaluation from Portland State University, which is over and above what any brick and mortar school receives, and our finances are audited annually just as all school districts in the state of Oregon are audited. We provide monthly financial reports prepared by our sponsor district to our governing board and report out to our board during board meetings, we are members of OSBA and utilize the policy service provided by OSBA in developing our governing documents and policies.

We do not support expending valuable resources to perform another study of virtual schools. We agree that virtual public charter schools provide an important service to students that are unable to participate in traditional schools. Charter schools do abide by different standards and regulations in regards to their governance for very good reasons. The general purpose of charter schools is to establish an alternative means within the existing public school system in order to provide innovative learning opportunities and creative educational approaches to improve the education of students. This is the primary reason that charters exist.

In 1992, President Clinton pushed for charter schools as an option for students stuck in failing schools. Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation for Teachers embraced the concept in 1988, when he called for the reform of the public schools by establishing "charter schools" or "schools of choice."

We have come along way since the first charter school opened its doors in Minnesota in 1991. There are now over 2.9 million students being served in over 6,700 schools in 42 states and the District of Columbia according to the 2015 report of the Center for Education Reform.

That same report gives Oregon a grade of “C” and ranks Oregon as the 18th weakest state in terms of the nations’ 43 charter laws. Primarily as the report states:

“Oregon has a weaker charter school law, largely because only school boards are allowed to authorize schools. Although the school boards have been active in their approval of schools totaling 125, the funding for charter school students is far from equitable as districts can take up to 20 percent of their funding in fees. The freedom of charter schools is limited because while they do receive a blanket waiver from most rules and regulations, there are restrictions on online/blended schools and district boards maintain power.”

Although we have a very strong relationship with our chartering district, it is important to understand our funding, which is different than what was presented to you earlier. In MEWA’s case, the district retains 5% of our 9-12th grade revenue and 20% of our 6-8th grade revenue. Additionally, the district charges us an extra 4 to 5% of our total revenue in indirect costs. So as you can see, we receive less than the amount stipulated in the statute.

As Representative McClain has stated, the state of Oregon owes a duty of care and review to taxpayers and students to ensure that all schools are using our public education funds to create the best possible outcomes for all students. We agree with this statement, but at the same time, believe that it is important to understand the reality of virtual charter schools as they presently exist. The majority of our students come from traditional brick and mortar schools credit and skill deficient, pregnant or parenting, homeless, forced to work to support themselves or their families, disengaged, disenfranchised, disenchanting and not on track to graduate in 4 years. The graduation rates of our sending high schools are skewed as we take the hit on the graduation rate for these students. We call these students “throw aways” as they have failed at traditional education. We exist because of this failure. We must remember, as widely reported in the media, Oregon ranks 49th in graduation rate – we cannot afford to throw away any more of our students. The costs are too high.

We know that to be successful in an online charter school, students must possess three characteristics: They must have strong reading skills, strong motivation, and strong parental support. Interestingly enough, these are the same characteristics that are important for any student to possess in any school. Most of our students are not only credit and skill deficient when they come to us, but lack one or more of these characteristics.

We are making a difference for our students: We have raised the graduation rate and reduced the dropout rate in our school every year of our existence. As stated by our independent evaluator from PSU, Dr. Victoria Luckich, Director, for the Center for Student Success, in her 2015 annual evaluation of our school:

Maintaining (MEWA) a steady climb in the school’s four-year graduation rate over the past five years: 14% in 2010 to 36% in 2014. Although MEWA’s graduation rate is

significantly less than the state average of 72%, it is important to remember that MEWA is an alternative program whose students are often “at risk” learners with a history of school withdrawal and deficient credits. It is difficult to compare the graduation rate for a school like MEWA with the grad rates of traditional, comprehensive high schools. The credit deficiency issue that confronts a “typical” Web Academy student means that keeping that student enrolled, engaged and able to meet all graduation requirements in four years after a likely history of enrolling/withdrawing from multiple other schools, is indeed significant. The improvement in MEWA’s four-year graduation rate over the past five years is commendable.

She further states:

69% of 11th graders at MEWA meet or exceed state standards in English language arts—2% higher than the state average.

62% of MEWA students (in all grades tested) meet or exceed the state standard in ELA—a higher percentage than the Gresham Barlow School District, the State and like-schools.

As you can see, we have lot’s of accountability and success given the reality of where our students are in the learning and credit attainment continuum when they come to us. We are for accountability. It is our recommendation that we utilize the systems that we already have in place rather than expending valuable resources to study, and/or establish new systems.