

February 4, 2016

Dear Chair Doherty and Members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to share my experience and thoughts on HB4091.

My name is Todd Miller, Superintendent of Santiam Canyon School District, a district sponsoring a public virtual charter schools, Oregon Connections Academy (ORCA).

My experience as a special education teacher, online school administrator, building administrator and now district administrator gives me a unique insight into our students' needs and online learning. Our entire education system has many areas for growth, not just online schools, but all schools. I'm sure you have seen statistics pointing to poor graduation rates of online schools, but this is just a symptom of the greater education weaknesses that we have in this state, and quite frankly, online schools may actually bring the state-wide graduation rate up... as most online students transfer in, many credit deficient or at-risk at the middle or high school level, and some of these students would not have graduated at all if this option was not available. The staff of online schools work tirelessly to keep many of these students engaged and supported to graduation. Representatives, please consider these 3 points regarding this bill and its impact.

1. This bill actually hinders innovation and it does not support the diverse needs of students who choose education online.

Innovation is the key to advancement in any field. This bill actually takes one of our most innovative areas in education and moves it backward many years. The bill requires access to printers for all students. This technology is quickly becoming antiquated and would put a burden on the schools to provide unwanted equipment. The cost and waste of printers, toner and shipping them around the state would provide a barrier to the real resources that can improve learning.

Additionally, the bill also changes the language from a 'plan to conduct meetings' to a "requirement' to conduct meetings at least twice a week between teachers and students enrolled in the school, either in person or through the use of conference calls or other technology" This is significant because our school and staff make every effort to have regular contact with students, yet for many reasons: anxiety, hospitalization or student work schedules make it unreasonable for some students to make this requirement every week. According to this bill, what happens when a student does not answer his phone or attend an online lesson twice a week to talk to the teacher? This student could be completing all work and getting great grades, but then what... is the student truant or unenrolled? This change in existing laws is not reasonable to support students who choose online education. Having a plan to conduct meetings is important and adequate, but a requirement goes too far.

2. Our limited state resources could be better used to support our schools and students, not go to gather information regarding a topic that is already highly studied and accountable.

Relevant information is already collected for all these schools. Online Public Charter Schools are governed by charter laws and district contracts. We added specific contract language tying ORCA to detailed academic and high school credit metrics. We both want student success and our contract binds it. We require improvement plans when warranted and can even terminate the contract, if these are not met.

These online schools have annual budgets, independent financial audits, annual reports stating programs offered and goal achievement AND ODE state report cards detailing their attendance, academic progress and graduation rates already. ORCA is currently through another round of national accreditation as well. The information needed to determine student success in online schools is already collected annually.

The last, and most important, accountability standard in place is the decision parents and students make to stay or leave the online schools. These schools are voluntary and if the schools are not meeting the needs of the family, with a click of a button, a student can leave and find another program to meet their needs. Online schools keep enrollment by providing relevant services and education to the students they serve.

ORCA offers an impressive amount of course offerings, including college credit options through Linn Benton CC and remediation classes. They offer special education, English as a Second Language, clubs, field trips, social gatherings, forums, academic, career and life counselors, and much more. These schools are already accountable to families, the district and the state.

3. This bill minimizes the abilities of rural schools and takes local control away from school district boards and the Oregon Department of Education's existing rules.

Rural schools already lack the resources to offer all the offerings of large schools, thus giving incentive to work with online schools to add partnerships and additional opportunities to students within our district and around the state. This bill appears to suggest that only large districts have the 'resources' to sponsor virtual charter schools. I work closely with the ED of ORCA and we share in successes and troubleshoot weaknesses weekly, if not more. A few years ago our district, with community input, developed a Strategic Plan, which placed an emphasis on our ability to build partnerships to increase learning opportunities. This partnership with ORCA fit well with our board's goals. Our board, administrative staff and myself are prepared to fulfill our oversight responsibility and work with ORCA, as we do with all the schools in our district, to support high academic achievement.

One of the first things you learn in education is that if you want a student to be successful on an evaluation, you must first give them the expectations. This bill 'evaluates' sponsors on 'appropriate' sponsorship based on an unknown set of expectations. It is a set up for failure and it does not work to progress education or student achievement in online schools. We already work well with the Oregon Department of Education to get them information and likewise, they are responsive to us when we have questions or needs.

I am always open to listening to new ideas and collaborating with others to improve our oversight responsibilities and the educational quality of the schools and students we serve. I support open conversations about online schools, charter schools and schools in general, but I don't feel this bill moves our state in the right direction toward supporting our students and their diverse needs. Online charter schools are not well understood, understandably so. Very few people have experience with online education and it is meant to serve a niche population. It is

different than how you and I learned, but it is highly effective for certain students. I invite each of you to come visit Santiam Canyon SD and ORCA to see how we are successfully serving students around the state.

Thank you for the time.