



Date: February 8, 2016
To: House Education Committee Chair Doherty and Members
From: Laurie Wimmer, OEA Government Relations
RE: HB 4091 [Study of Virtual Schools in Oregon]

On behalf of OEA's 43,000 members, it is my honor to testify in support of HB 4091, which would take a 10-year look at virtual schools just as we did with brick-and-mortar charters in a 10-year review process in 2009.

It will come as no secret to this committee that our members have had concerns since the inception of online learning for K-12 students in our public system. We have raised, over these years, issues of quality, access, equity, funding, transparency, and accountability.

We have worried that single-parent households, low-income families, or homes in which English is not spoken, would be logically barred from this new public service. We noted that special education services were sometimes unavailable or impractical for some would-be students. We questioned whether laptop schools, which did not have the infrastructural or personnel overhead of traditional schools, would really require the same level of funding. And, of course, we delved into the neuroscience and educational psychology of non-relational learning, questioning whether this was an appropriate way to serve high-risk kids and small children especially. Our concerns have been validated by recent academic research of provider programs and their successes or lack. We have included materials relating to several of the best-known studies with this testimony.

Now that Oregon offers some 13 online learning options to our students, it makes sense to see how we're doing. There are several different types of online schools – district sponsored, district run, non-profit, and for-profit. A few offer single courses, rather than full-time enrollment, which is in high demand for students who wish to remain in their resident school district with friends, extra-curricular activities, and their community close at hand. Most, however, are full-time "laptop" schools serving children as young as age five. A parent must be the "learning coach" and all materials are in English, thereby eliminating students who are in English-language-learner programs.

This bill does not attempt to draw conclusions, only ask legitimate questions, about the performance and funding of all programs serving students with public funds. It may be that not all programs are created equal: by observing the "who, how, and how much" of virtual education, the state may indeed decide to fine-tune its policies and funding of these programs going forward. Or it may not. That will be a decision for a future legislative body.

We especially appreciate the tightening of some "squishy" language passed in 2011 that embeds in the statutes a perennial "plan" to serve students. If I ask my children to "plan" to clean their rooms, it is fairly certain that the "plan" will never translate to a clean bedroom. If I tell my children that they are required to clean their rooms, the chances of those hovels remaining a public health hazard are much less likely. ☺ We believe that the Legislature meant for the metaphorical rooms to be cleaned, not dreamt of in perpetuity. That change will underscore the importance of quality in online offerings.

We urge your passage of HB 4091. Thank you so much for considering our input.