



Bill Kenemer

Please Oppose SB 1541-B

We would like to acknowledge the good work by House members to address some of the concerns our organization has expressed about Senate Bill 1541, which seems like the classic "solution in search of a problem". While the House Rules Committee amended the bill, which we appreciate, the legislation before you is still something we cannot support, because its underlying goal is to question the budget decisions made by duly elected, local school boards and their citizen budget committees.

The bill directs the Department of Education to study the "variations" in school district budget decisions on a category-by-category basis and to link spending to allocations and student "outcomes" (in consultation with the Chief Education Office).

The uninitiated eye might see this fishing trip as innocent and interesting. Those of us who have been through the disruptions and failed experiments of the most recent educational reform era in Oregon, however, are understandably wary.

Legislative intent was established in the House Rules Committee that this study incorporate the input of school boards and administrator groups, but the bill itself does not formally offer an opportunity to question, challenge, correct, or otherwise impact the lens with which the author(s) of the report may apply to the project. No partnering, data gathering, or testimony will be required, and no scrutiny of drafts prior to presentation before the legislative committee.

Having witnessed what has happened in the past when such "studies" have been generated (on transportation, finance efficiency research, and others), we raise a note of caution as to the validity of this project.

There already exist several sources that address the various data points of the bill. For instance, one may compare districts to each other by logging onto the Chalkboard Project's Open Books web site. One can know precisely the financial accountability of school districts by accessing the online one-stop access to all 197 school districts' annual Municipal Audits. If one wants to explore how different spending might impact outcomes, one has only to read the latest report from the Quality Education Commission, also available to the public online. And finally, if one wants to understand at a granular level the link between revenues and expenditures of school districts and ESDs, one may explore the reports of the School Revenue Forecast Committee. Finally, the research canon of school finance academia is replete with studies on the most efficacious use of public funds to elicit optimal education results.

We have not heard a pressing need for this bill, nor has the sponsor explained his intent with respect to "next steps" once the Legislature receives the report. We certainly hope it is not simply a launching point for an exercise in the State substituting its judgment for that of local districts in budgeting resources for their public school operations.

Finally, it would seem that this bill is predicated on the notion that public school "outcomes" are all about how money is spent, and not on how much money is sent.

For all of these reasons, we urge you not to pass SB 1541, despite the House revisions that have made it less troubling than the Senate's version. Thank you for considering our perspective.