

February 22, 2017

To Chair Doherty and the Esteemed Members of the House Committee on Education,

I am submitting written testimony to you in support of HB 2550. I want to lend my full endorsement to this proposal to increase students' access to school social workers. School social workers are uniquely qualified to improve student outcomes, including areas of great importance to the State of Oregon like attendance and graduation rates.

As you know, chronic and severe absenteeism has significant negative impacts on learning at all grade levels, graduation rates and, subsequently, life outcomes of Oregon's children. According to the ODE website, nearly 20% of Oregon's students were chronically absent for the 2015-16 school year, which is 102,000 kids. The percentages go up when disaggregated by race and income with Native American students being impacted more than any other group.

I also want to share my insights from being on the Portland Public Schools Attendance Team. I have found my social work education and background to be ideal in helping me address the myriad of issues that prevent students from consistently attending school. After all, chronic attendance issues are a symptom, not the problem. And it is the symptom of homelessness and housing instability, domestic violence, child neglect, mental health issues and poverty. These are issues that social workers are uniquely trained and qualified to respond to and address. Social workers are prepared to work with extremely vulnerable kids and families to build trust, identify resources and take critical steps toward stability.

In working with families to increase their children's attendance, I routinely make home visits, collaborate with school staff, work with building administrators to implement school-wide incentives and partner with community providers to address the underlying issues impacting attendance. Making home visits and engaging families that can be defensive and guarded at first is something that social workers are uniquely qualified to do. In addition, the attendance issues at the schools I support is large and I would not be able to impact it if I worked to address absenteeism one student at a time. Instead, my background in finding resources and working collaboratively with different providers, including culturally specific ones, helps to increase the impact of my work.

I feel strongly that to truly address this State's substantial attendance issues, we need trained social workers who can hit the ground running and be able to effectively work with school staff and lead school attendance efforts. Leaving the work to para-professionals denies the complexity of addressing these issues and sets the State up for continued poor outcomes. Our graduation rates, our schools and our children cannot wait. We need committed legislators to prioritize education for all children and recognize the skills and training it takes to make meaningful positive impacts on increasing school attendance.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Respectfully Submitted,

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