

4-8-17

House Committee on Health Care

Regarding HB 2408

Honorable Chair Greenlick, Vice Chair Nosse, Vice Chair Hayden and all members of the House Committee on Education:

I am writing in opposition to HB 2408, and have included my reasoning in this letter. I do, however, strongly support HB 2174 which appropriates money to have ODE hire and place social workers in public schools. I know from personal experience that many students in Oregon public schools have a staggering amount of unaddressed mental health issues that require our focus and attention. However, HB 2408 is not an effective or financially prudent way to meet those needs.

With our budget shortfall, it is not the appropriate time to be spending valuable tax payer money to expand school based health centers when districts will likely be laying off school staff. I work in Portland Public Schools, and the staff and program cuts that are planned for next year have been widely publicized. Staff reductions often disproportionately affect non direct teaching staff and will negatively impact the provision of mental health care directly in the schools.

Section 2 of HB 2408 appropriates \$3,000,000 to increase access to school based mental health providers. We absolutely need to have more school counselors and school social workers to meet the mental health needs of students. School counselors are not mandated and are easy to cut with budget shortfalls. This is a question of equity and parity. All children in Oregon deserve access to counselors and social workers, not just the few schools that have a SBHC.

Section 3 of HB 2408 creates a pilot program to decrease rates of school absenteeism by using a trauma informed approach. The need is well documented and a pilot program is not needed to prove the obvious. We need “boots on the ground” – social workers and counselors who are ready at every moment during the school day to not only keep our students in school but to interact and support them throughout the day as needed. We do not need the SBHC and SBHCA to act as a “middle man” in this process.

This pilot is intended to hire social workers for the SBHC. I must say I have a School Based Health Center at my school, and use them constantly and have a great relationship with them. I am grateful they are available to be primary providers for those students that need it. I could not do my job without them. They are a medical office “provider” right on the school grounds. That however, does not give them access to public school students. HIPPA and FERPA regulations are pretty clear that confidential student information cannot be shared with outside providers or anyone outside the education system. Our school children have access to their SBHC, but the SBHC do not have access to children. School staff attend to the needs of Oregon school children, and refer to providers as necessary, as I have done many times. Statistics show there is a SBHC in about 10% of Oregon schools, and of course, not every student

in those schools are a client of the SBHC, so it also doesn't make sense to give that kind of money to a SBHC when they only have access to less than 5% of Oregon students at most.

As I mentioned, a social worker that is not a district employee cannot have access to even basic attendance information. How can they show that they are effective in reducing rates of absenteeism if they cannot even have access to that information? School counselors, social workers and school nurses have access to that information and are in a much better position to improve the academic success and attendance of the students we serve. Often a team of staff need to work together to address all the complicated issues surrounding absenteeism, and a school based health clinic social worker would not be able to participate fully.

In addition, schools all over the state are already becoming versed in trauma informed approaches to education. Teachers have been exposed to this approach through ongoing PBIS training that happens in schools. Principals were trained last month in Salem. School Nurses had Dr. Teri Pettersen from Trauma Informed Oregon who trained us at our last conference. My point is that there has been ongoing training in this area, and schools are already using this approach in helping our students be successful. There are already 7 Trauma Informed summits and forums scheduled from this week through May in various cities throughout the state. It is a much more prudent use of taxpayer money to make effective use of the experts that we already have in Oregon rather than begin a pilot program housed in the SBHC where they will not be able to be as effective as the school districts themselves can be.

I respectfully request that you give funds to ODE so that we can hire many school counselors and social workers to directly serve our students. HB 2408 does not do this.

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