

5/29/2020

House Interim Committee on Education:

Thank you, Chair Alonso Leon, and to the House Interim Committee, for allowing me to speak to you this afternoon. My name is Jennifer Scurlock and I am a proud educator in the state of Oregon. I have been a classroom teacher for 17 years, and I currently teach AP English Language and Composition and English 11 at Churchill High School in Eugene, Oregon.

I hope my response will help guide your future decisions as we figure out how to best support our students, our families, and our communities in the midst of COVID-19.

As a classroom teacher, I want you to know I have and continue to be inspired by my students. They are full of promise, hopes and dreams. Some of my students know exactly what they want to do after graduation. I have future business owners, doctors, politicians, nurses, coaches, psychologists, screen writers, physical therapists, and educators that will make you proud. Some of my students think they are “too cool for school,” but the same students come and talk to me before school or during lunch just to say hello, or for a little encouragement just to make it through the week. And as we make crucial decisions around public education, we must never forget that ALL of our students are full of promise and potential, even the ones who do not recognize their greatness. This is perhaps the greatest part of being an educator. We can speak life into a dark situation, we can speak hope into the life of a kid who struggles with depression, anxiety, eating disorders, anger issues, homelessness, difficult immigration status issues, the effects of racism, and feeling unseen and unheard. Yes, we have and continue to make what seems impossible possible because we stand in the gap for our students.

In the midst of this pandemic, my fellow educators and I have become keenly aware of the inequities that impact our students and families. The opportunity gap between those who have and those who do not is undeniable, even for those who have failed to see it in the past. For example, some of our students have dependable Internet access, but many do not. Some students can quickly access our lesson plans and other materials via Google Classroom, but some have to wait until they can come into town to park at the school or a nearby coffee shop to access our weekly lesson plans and activities. Some students have parents or guardians who can help them navigate through the process of distance learning, but many do not. Some students are taking care of multiple siblings and family members, and are working to make ends meet. Some students have a safe place to learn in their homes with food and shelter—where their basic needs are met— but many of our students have issues with unsafe living environments, for school has and continues to be their refuge from chaos in the home.

As we quickly learn how to implement effective distance learning practices for our students and families, we often hear our fellow teachers or administrators say, “We are building the plane as we fly.” And I cannot deny or minimize this powerful use of imagery as we try to meet the needs of all of our students. Every day, we are available for

Zoom meetings and additional office hours to support all students. We are learning to use Google Classroom and other online resources to create effective and engaging lesson plans, activities, special projects and assessments for our students. We meet with our Professional Learning Communities (PLC) to plan each week, always trying to use our equity lens in our planning because we are aware of the homework gap and the stress our students and families are facing in the midst of the pandemic. We work with our special education teachers, educational assistants, and school counselors to provide accommodations and modifications for students who have individual education plans (IEPs), or need additional support as referenced in their 504 Plans. Some of our students at the elementary and middle school level have education packets delivered to their front doors to help with the broadband opportunity gap.

Although we are doing our best to support our students and their families, the mental health of our students has been a painful challenge. We know that teen suicide is the second leading cause of death among teens in Oregon. In addition to students and families financial struggles, pre-existing issues—such as depression, self-harm, anxiety, suicidal thoughts-- increase in the midst of a crisis. In March of this year, shortly after our schools closed, a 14-year-old student from our school committed suicide. In early May, one of my students tried to take her life. On top of acts of racism, police brutality, unemployment, homelessness, our students are dealing with fear of the unknown. They want to know what will happen to their friends, their family, and their community? These factors impact a student's ability to function on a daily basis, for there must be a balance between academic and mental health, and the physical screen between teachers and students do not allow the innovation that we see in the classroom, or the one-on-one support that helps our students to thrive.

As legislators, please recognize that the equity issue between those who have access to the Internet and technology are real, and if we do not address this issue, the skill deficit will continue to increase. In addition, we must continue to support our school counselors and mental health professionals, for education is much more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. It is about taking care of the whole child—mind, body, and spirit. We know there will be funding challenges with the loss of tax revenue in our state, but we must do everything we can to preserve public education funding in the midst of this pandemic, and do what we can to get students safely back to the classroom. We must continue to support and develop their human potential. Our students and families are depending on us to help them through these difficult times. Thank you for your time.

~ Jennifer Scurlock
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