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Via Email
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Senator Michael Dembrow, Chair
Senator Chuck Thomsen, Vice Chair
Senator Sara Gelser
Senator Mark Hass
Senator Dallas Heard
Senate Interim Committee on Education
Oregon State Legislature

Re: Equity in Education Policy Proposals

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Thomsen, and Committee Members:

Today, you will hear testimony from Reimagine Oregon. Among their “Policy Demands” is increased funding for charter schools. Cascade Policy Institute agrees. But, you can do even more to advance equity and foster excellence in education. It doesn’t require new taxes. It doesn’t require new spending. And, it doesn’t require a sprawling bureaucracy.

Put simply, Oregon must flip its education funding model. Instead of funneling money through its dysfunctional public school *system*, the state should support *students* directly by providing each student their share of the State School Fund.

I have four kids: a fifth grader, a high schooler, and two in college. My sister is a fifth grade public school teacher, my wife is Kindergarten educational assistant at Portland Public Schools, and I teach part time at Portland State University. Based on firsthand and secondhand experience, the way we deliver education in Oregon is a mess. We’ve been rejiggering and “reforming” education for decades. For years, we’ve layered tax increase on top of tax increase “for the kids.” Yet, we have the [third worst](#) high school graduation rate and are ranked in the bottom half of states for college readiness. The state’s pandemic response will make these measures even worse.

My fifth grader in Portland Public Schools just got his daily COVID-19 class schedule, and there’s a lot of alone time. On a typical day, he meets with his classroom teacher over Zoom for 75 minutes over the 6.25 hour day. There’s a half-hour “morning meeting,” 30 minutes to review language arts and social studies, and 15 minutes to discuss math.

Nearly three-quarters of the time he's "in school" he's actually watching videos posted by his teacher or working on his own.

Over and over, Governor Kate Brown and our school boards remind us, "We're all in this together." But, if you talk to parents and kids, many feel like they're all on their own. On their own to find space for kids to work. On their own to buy the laptops, printers, webcams, microphones, and headphones to support "online learning." On their own to pay their broadband providers to supply enough bandwidth to support multiple people video conferencing at the same time. On their own to balance their jobs or job hunts with the school's Zoom-on, Zoom-off daily schedule.

When the pandemic hit, thousands of parents tried to enroll their children in online charter schools that had a long history of effective distance learning. Some of you were in the room (virtually) when, in June, the Oregon Education Association [lobbied](#) against lifting the enrollment cap for online charters. The union argued even a modest lifting of the cap would take money away from public school districts. To them, our kids are just numbers fed into a formula that funds the system. Rather than working with existing money, they are demanding even more spending on the public school system.

On average, Oregon school districts receive about \$10,500 per student (ADM) from the State School Fund. If students aren't getting adequate instruction from their public schools, they should get that money back to receive instruction elsewhere. States like Oklahoma and South Carolina have already taken advantage of similar ideas by reallocating much of their federal stimulus dollars directly to families to help them adapt to this school year.

Think of it as a money-back guarantee. If the public school isn't working for your kids or your family, you should have a right to take that money and spend it somewhere that does. Public school districts will benefit from reduced enrollment and can achieve smaller class sizes without increasing the number of teachers on the public payroll and adding to the growing PERS crisis. Because many public school districts have local funding that does not depend on enrollment numbers, reduced enrollment will actually *increase* per student spending in their districts.

Direct funding of students reduces inequities in school systems because it allows *all* students to have access to education alternatives. Almost [60%](#) of public charter school students in the U.S. are Black or Hispanic. Imagine what these families could do with as much as \$10,500 per student to spend on educational expenses. If equity is the goal, school choice through direct funding is the surest and quickest path.

If your local grocery store doesn't re-open or can't keep its shelves stocked, families can take their money elsewhere. In contrast, under our current public education system, families pay income taxes and property taxes to fund schools that aren't fully open and don't deliver. On top of that, families have to spend their own money on equipment and supplies to support their kids' distance learning. Many workers have had to quit their jobs or put off their search for work so they can stay home while their children distance-learn. If we're all in this together, who's looking out for them?

Senators, this is your chance to shine. Flip the funding of education in Oregon. Give the money to the students and you will be stunned by their success. It's not just about equity. It's about equity and excellence.

Respectfully submitted by

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric Fruits". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Eric Fruits, Ph.D.