

Testimony for House Education Committee  
Increasing Student Broadband Access  
September 22, 2020  
Ginny Lang, representing Oregon Business Council

Good morning, Chair Alonso Leon, Vice-Chairs Helt and Neron, and members of the committee. My name is Ginny Lang and today I'm representing the Oregon Business Council (OBC) and a variety of partners, all working together to provide or improve broadband service for students, families and educators.

#### Public/private partnership

First, it's important to describe how this public/private partnership came together.

OBC has a long history in public policy research and analysis, and has developed strong working relationships with business groups, government leaders and agencies, non-profits, and community-based organizations.

That network galvanized in March when COVID-19 abruptly changed the delivery of teaching and learning for Oregon students. OBC, the Oregon Community Foundation, and many other businesses and organizations fully engaged with the Oregon Department of Education and school districts across the state to promote digital equity and to identify distance learning needs. Widely available and consistent access to high quality broadband is crucial to ensuring equitable online learning opportunities.

Concurrently, Oregon's broadband service providers came forward with discounted service plans, offers of devices and training, and an all-in willingness to work with each other, individual schools, districts, teachers and families – in short, with whoever it takes to figure out ways to increase broadband access.

Since early August, after Governor Brown announced CARES Act funding for the Comprehensive Distance Learning Grants program, department leaders have convened a weekly partners' meeting including OBC, COSA, OSBA, Business Oregon and others to share information, discuss issues, and connect the dots in order to meet as many needs as possible in the most effective manner.

#### Access and connectivity

The primary focus is increasing access and connectivity, though several partner organizations are also helping to secure devices and offer training. Providers and community partners are attempting to leverage every funding or service option, whether it's a hot spot from a wireless carrier, monthly discounts through the Oregon Telephone Assistance Program or Lifeline, or discounted rates from cable providers including Comcast and others.

Most immediately, we are focused on the largest opportunity – households where broadband is readily available right now, but for a variety of reasons has not been ordered or installed.

In other cases, service providers may be able to extend lines or use advanced technology to improve bandwidth or provide new capabilities within reasonably short timeframes.

In both situations, the goal is to match up a service provider who “knows the territory” with knowledgeable partners from the local district or community, and then compare information and create a plan to improve service or resolve problems for individual households or school buildings. This is where our shared efforts to connect the dots show the most promise for identifying and closing gaps.

We also recognize that many communities are still assessing the extent of losses or damage to communications and other physical infrastructure due to recent wildfires. Many of our member companies are long-time community residents and leaders and they will work tirelessly with local officials to get systems and networks up and running as quickly as possible.

#### Going forward

Expanding the availability of broadband services in currently unserved or underserved areas is not a new, or inexpensive, challenge. It requires building new infrastructure or upgrading older technology. Some of these projects may be completed by the end of 2020, but much work will remain unfinished. Supply chain logjams and high demand for devices and materials, like fiber optic cable, have created backlogs.

What we all know is that widespread, high-quality broadband service available in every corner of our state is an imperative for Oregon’s future. For education, of course, but also for tele-work, tele-health, tele-everything.

Our goal is to be very intentional as we work together: implement the obvious short-term solutions; leverage our collective expertise, local knowledge, and available funding streams for the medium-term projects; and then commit to continuing the necessary long-term public and private investment and collaboration to complete the job.

We appreciate your interest and thank you for your attention.