

Senate Education Committee Testimony
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ReImagine Oregon

Speakers: Kali Thorne Ladd, Joe McFerrin II, Elona Wilson

Introduction: For the Record:

My name is Kali Thorne Ladd, Executive Director of KairosPdx. Thank you for having me here today.

I'd like to begin with a quote by civil rights activist Valarie Kaur that speaks to the moment we are in now. She says, speaking of leaders and great teachers of our past,

“Nanak said it, Mohamed led it, Jesus taught it, Buddah envisioned it, Martin Luther King dreamt it, Dorothy Day labored for it, Mandela lived it, Gandhi died for it, Grace Lee Boggs fought for it for seven decades. They called for us not only to unseat bad actors, but to reimagine the institutions of power and ofer in the world.”

We have a historic opportunity now to reimagine public education in a way that is grounded in equity, understanding that we currently have an education system that mimics white supremacist structures embedded into the fabric of this society.

While the structures may not collectively be our fault. The decision to act in this moment, does lie on our shoulders

ReImagine Oregon is a concerted effort from a collective of Black Leaders to re-imagine what our public policy and institutions can look like when they value the life of Black people, Black children and Black families.

If racism is one of this state's greatest sins, failure to provide quality education to Black children for decades is a direct by-product of it. This has been amplified and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. ReImagine Oregon lays out policy proposals that include access to quality early childhood, disrupting the school to prison pipeline (recognizing the documented evidence that policing was born out of an attempt to keep Black people enslaved) , increasing the diversity of teachers, ensuring that innovations within the educational ecosystem are supported and ensuring that the money we invest in the educational system is done so with an equity framework.

We talk about reimagining intentionally. Because just tinkering and reforming isn't an option. It is the difference between saying:

"Your humanity kinda matters when it's convenient and when I have time for it to"

AND

"I see you. I value who you are as a full human being and I commit to honoring your humanity by providing a fair and unbiased opportunity for you to succeed."

Reimagining is both the opportunity and the only choice to truly transform. I will turn it over to my colleagues now to present some highlights of this work.

Good Morning Senator Dembrow, members of the Senate Committee on Education, and colleagues presenting in support of Reimagine Oregon.

My name is Joe McFerrin II, and I am entering my 18th year as the President and CEO of Portland Opportunities Industrialization Center and Rosemary Anderson High School, or POIC for short.

POIC has served Black and African American communities for more than 50 years. Each year, POIC educates over 600 students who transfer from seven school districts, provides wrap-around services for families with justice-involved children, offers employment services for adults re-entering the community after incarceration, and conducts youth violence prevention and intervention programming.

The School to Prison Pipeline in Oregon is working well. Fostered by our state's historic and ongoing racist policies and systems, this pipeline remains robust and well-supported. Black people are over-policed in the community and over-policed at school, fueling this trajectory that impacts so many Black lives in our state.

I implore the Oregon Senate Committee on Education to support the Reimagine Oregon movement.

For so many of Oregon's Black students, they enter the School to Prison Pipeline as they enter their very first classroom. The academic and discipline disparities Black students face turn what should be an institution of empowerment into one that strips their humanity and tramples on their determination.

During the 2018-19 school year as reported by ODE:

- Just 70 percent of Black high school students graduated within four years, compared to 80 percent of all high school students.
- And, 13 percent of Black students experienced one or more discipline incidents, compared to 6.5 percent of all students.

During 2019 As reported by OYA:

While Black youth make up less than 2 percent of the state's youth population, they make up over 10 percent of all youth criminal referrals statewide – and while Black youth make up 5 percent of Multnomah County's youth population, they make up 41 percent of all youth criminal referrals county wide

And as reported by Oregon Department of Corrections:

Black community members make up 2 percent of Oregon's population, yet 7 percent of our state's prison population.

The over representation of Black people in Oregon's criminal justice system is astonishing.

I would like to share with you the experience of former Black student who lived the School to Prison Pipeline. His name is Jonny he is adult now and is raising a son. These are Jonny's words.

Growing up my dad was in out of jail a lot, I first learned about jail in the second grade. I did not get to spend much time with him growing up. He did not graduate from high school. Many of my uncle's did not graduate from high school went to jail too. My mom did an awesome job raising five kids with out him. We didn't have much money, but she made it work. I began having challenges in school during middle school. I attended three different middle schools in one year. I can't remember specifically why we had to move so much but my family ultimately landed in east Portland. I ended up at a school where there were only a few black students and no black teachers. I felt isolated and I can remember being angry because I used to hear white parents making negative comments about me and school staff allow it to happen. We didn't have a lot of money, but I wanted the nice things that so many of the white kids had. I got caught stealing a new pair of Jordan's and was sent to Juvenile detention. My mom refused to come and get me out, but my aunt did. The only person who really challenged me learn was my high school football coach. No one else pushed me academically. Now that I think about the system just passed me through and I think many of my friends had the same experience. I remember getting in a fight in high school and was suspended for a week. My best friend in high school who is white got in a fight latter that same year and was not even sent home for the day. Everyone knew that black kids always were punished more than the white students. Me and my friend still talk about this situation to this day. After graduating from high school, I was arrested and taken to jail for being in the wrong place, with the wrong people, at the wrong time. Luckily, I only had to serve twenty days locked up. I have not been in trouble since. So many of my family members and friends have had terrible experiences with various schools and the law. I come from a large extended family and unfortunately my last name is well known in the streets. As a father I am doing everything I can to make sure that my son gets the best education and never goes to jail. I wish I could rely on the schools, but I know that I will have be involved every step of the way to make sure he gets treated well.

Thank you!

Signed.....Jonny

Today, many of the overt methods of marginalizing, demeaning, and disrespecting Black students might be less visible than in the past, but make no mistake – they are still very much present and the continued success of the School to Prison Pipeline make that clear.

Black students who violate school rules are more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions, mostly for subjective reasons, which increases the likelihood of interaction with law

enforcement. Then, upon entering the juvenile justice system, Black youth are disproportionately charged with crimes and are much more likely to be locked up and eventually enter the adult criminal system.

I and many others who have deep institutional knowledge of this State and our community believe adopting, funding, and enforcing the policy demands outlined in Reimagine Oregon will directly dismantle the School-To-Prison Pipeline. All Black students deserve to be challenged, treated with dignity and respect, and in doing so can realize their full potential; these policies help us achieve this.

Hello and good morning. Senator Dembrow, members of the Senate Committee on Education.

My name is Elona Janae Wilson and I am a Community Organizer for Stand for Children and member of the Reimagine Oregon founders team. Thank you for having me here today.

I'd like to begin with this quote to center us as I begin:

“You ultimately judge the civility of a society **not** by how it treats the rich, the powerful, the protected and the highly esteemed, but by how it treats *the poor, the disfavored and the disadvantaged.*” Bryan Stevenson

As these words simmer, I urge you to really think about education in our state. If we judge the civility of a society by how it treats the poor, the disfavored and the disadvantaged children, as a state how are we doing? How are those children? How are our babies? From where I sit, they are not well, but we can change that. **WE** can change that.

We have seen this first-hand most recently with Measure 98 and Student Success Act that when resources are **centered** around the immediate needs of the community, we see drastic change in everything from improvement of individual well-being, to graduation rates to the state's economy.

Five years ago, we put these beliefs into practice in our advocacy for the Black and African American Student Success Plan. We're proud to see how that work has continued to advance us along the path towards equity and justice. Its success - built upon by [Measure 98](#) and [Student Success Act](#) - demonstrates the importance and need of targeted funding.

We look forward to the day when we directly address the needs of our kids and our community space so that students can thrive.

With that understanding, I ask: why are we sheltering the 9 billion of the state school fund from the racial disparities that we see in this state? Why are we making solutions regarding racial justice in the miscellaneous buckets when it comes to funding? Is the 9 billion of the state school fund immune to racism?

A couple years ago a mentor of mine said “show me your budget and I'll show you your priorities.”

Our funding is a direct representation of our priorities and I believe that as folks in this state as saying, “Black lives matter,” we need to see that in every penny allocated.

Targeted investments are how we ensure every single student has a chance to thrive.

Here's what I mean when I say targeted investments: in order to ensure every student has the chance to reach their potential, we must first acknowledge the roadblocks they face. Then, we set aside funds specifically intended to clear those roadblocks.

So if we know that when we acknowledge race as a roadblock and when we change our funding, students are successful, AND we know we don't have to spend additional funding to do it, then all we have to do is target where each dollar goes. Intentionality is how our students are going to thrive.

To apply an equity lens is a constant change of practice. To have a truly equitable lens, it must be applied in every. Single. Situation. And thus in every. Single. Penny. Spent. Equity is not convenient, but it's worth it because we know that there is a profound impact on our students when we are intentional.

As we face potential statewide budget cuts, we must recognize that the use of an equity framework to dollars are needs, not wants. As our Executive Director Toya Fick said in the Oregonian, "Our priorities must remain clear and we cannot afford to lose ground ... The coronavirus pandemic has wreaked an unforeseen havoc on our state, and we are only beginning to see the side effects. The only way to inoculate our society from future pandemics and crises is by doing all we can to provide a world-class education for all students. If we are to protect our future, we must defend our progress."

We are confident that funding the needs of our children will bring about change because when we directly address issues, we see direct solutions.
