

Senate Education Committee

February 6, 2019

Testimony of Verna Wise Matthews, Executive Director of Ophelia's Place

SB. 180

Chair Wagner and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for scheduling SB 180 for a hearing today.

I am Verna Wise Matthews, Executive Director of Ophelia's Place, a prevention based non-profit dedicated to empowering youth. There are many bills that have been introduced this session on the topic of behavioral health for youth and bullying prevention. We are delighted to see that. We have been working for some time to bring forward a bill like SB 180 – focused on preventing bullying and empowering youth in middle school. We are grateful to Senator Gelser and Representative Nancy Nathanson for their leadership.

The definition of bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance and in many cases is repetitive. Pre-technology bullying typically happened face-to-face and was contained to a school or other specific environment. Today bullying is much more pervasive, usually without face-to-face contact and is often more emotional than physical. With ever changing technology and constant access, today's bullying does not stop when students go home.

As you might already know, the results of the 2017 Oregon Healthy Teens Survey showed that 30% of our middle schoolers reported being bullied at school in the month prior to the survey. And the Pew National Research center states "59% of teens have been bullied or harassed online". And the risk of being bullied goes up for youth who are perceived as different by their peers, specifically students with disabilities, LGBTQ students and socially-isolated youth. As for students of color research shows that bias-based bullying is more strongly associated with compromised health than general bullying.

The fact that the topic of social emotional health and creating safe schools for our children is being widely discussed during this session is so encouraging. My message today is students do not have to wait to have improved school experiences. SB180 will help.

SB180 proposes \$6M for Oregon middle schools and high schools to partner with community-based organizations (like Ophelia's Place and others) to provide bullying prevention and youth empowerment programs to students, their families, and educators. What that means is you would be funding programs that are multi-dimensional, holistic and could reach all Oregon middle schoolers for \$45 per student. Senate bill 180 would give schools the opportunity to create a culture that is supported by parents, all educators (certified and classified) and students. This bill ensures that teachers are

educated, students are given skills and resources and parents have the opportunity to support and reinforce anti-bullying behaviors too. For peer bullying prevention and intervention to be successful, it requires educators, students and parents to work together to create a culture of empathy and inclusion.

SB180 provides support so schools can receive trauma-informed, skills-based information on topics like bullying prevention, critical thinking, making healthy choices and conflict resolution in small group and classroom settings. It also call for a statewide conference on bullying prevention and empowerment.

Students with strong emotional and behavioral supports experience more academic success in school. We know that much public debate about education involves discussion of graduation rates, test scores and other output metrics. But our youth will never reach those measures unless we provide safe and supportive environments.

But there is hope! We can do something about bullying and we don't have to wait! More than half of bullying can be stopped by intervention of a peer at school. And an even greater percent can be stopped when effective school systems and supports are in place.

Let me share the model that Ophelia's Place has created and the impact we have on schools. Between 2014-2017 Ophelia's Place partnered with The Ford Family Foundation and Oregon Research Institute to implement a controlled evaluation of our "Full School Partnership" program. We wanted to know what impact Ophelia's Place services have when we go into schools and provide classroom presentations to all students, annual training to all staff, parent education and empowerment groups. In other words, we wanted to know the impact our services had on school climate.

The results are exciting (and too good not to spread)! The students in schools where we provided comprehensive services showed higher levels of self-esteem, experienced less peer victimization and felt greater support from their peers. And on post evaluations two 6<sup>th</sup> graders wrote "Thank you for giving me a chance to help myself" and "Thank you for helping us be a better person and know that bullying isn't the answer". Counselors in Ophelia's Place partner schools also reported a drop in referrals which translated into more time for them to focus on students with the greatest needs.

Because we engaged the students, teachers and parents we created environments with consistent language, clear definitions and greater empathy. With your support, the key components of this work can be in place in every middle school in Oregon.

All students need to be taught bullying prevention skills and given resources. All educators and support staff need to be trained in effective intervention and support skills. And all parents should be given the opportunity to receive information and skills to promote the social and emotional well-being of their tweens and teens.

Our goal is to create school environments where students' sense of safety does not distract them from succeeding in their academic work. And now I would like you to hear from a Superintendent who partnered with Ophelia's Place.