

TO: Joint Committee on Student Success
FROM: Ruth Shelly, Executive Director, Portland Children's Museum
RE: Student Success Act
DATE: April 11, 2019

Co-chairs Roblan and Smith Warner, and members of the committee:

My name is Ruth Shelly, and I serve as Executive Director of Portland Children's Museum, which includes the Opal Charter School serving students in grades K – 5. Opal School is also a member of the Oregon Coalition of Community Charter Schools—a collaboration of schools of which we're proud to be part.

Thank you for working to raise close to \$2 billion in new revenue for schools during this legislative session. This investment in public education is critical for the future of our state.

Our Opal Charter School was founded in 2001, soon after the charter school legislation passed in Oregon. The Charter School Statutory Intent states that "It is the intent that public charter schools may serve as models and catalysts for the improvement of other public schools and the public school system." The stated goals for Oregon charter schools include:

- Encourage the use of different and innovative learning methods;
- Provide opportunities in small learning environments for flexibility and innovation, which may be applied, if proven effective, to other public schools; and
- Create new professional opportunities for teachers.

At Opal Charter School, we take those goals of innovation and professional development seriously. More than 1,000 teachers from across Oregon, the United States, and even the world attend our onsite workshops and annual symposium each year. Our Opal Online learning platform supports educators with web-based courses that accommodate any teacher's schedule or physical location.

And we are not alone. Public charter schools across Oregon are educating close to 40,000 students in educational settings that are innovative and developed with the needs of students within our communities in mind. We strive to be partners with our fellow charter schools and with districts in Oregon in order to share our models, learnings, and practices. Through partnership with others in the public education system, we can find ways to ensure each child in the state has access to the type of educational programming that fits their needs.

Unfortunately, we operate our programs with severely limited resources. Oregon's K–8th grade charter schools only receive 80% of the State School Fund dollars per pupil allocated to public schools. Right now is budget planning time for our school, and every year I see the gap grow between increasing expenses and our reduced revenue per student. As you develop this significant new investment in our schools, please be inclusive of our students. Don't continue to treat charter school students as second-class citizens.

With additional funds, our Opal Charter School could:

- Provide a school counselor. Sadly, each year we have at least one child among our 88 K-5 students who threatens self-harm.
- Restore a lunch program
- Create a breakfast program
- Hire an arts specialist
- Offer music classes

Charter school students ARE public school students. Counselors or meal programs are not luxuries; they are basic to student health and wellbeing. Excluding charter school students in funding is not neutral; this lack of funding harms them in tangible ways.

Sadly, lack of funding for charter schools also makes it harder to hire *and retain* teaching candidates with diverse backgrounds.

As I said, we strive to be partners in this work. Partners with you, with the Oregon Department of Education, with our district leadership, and educators across Oregon. We want to share from what we've learned over the years and to find ways to support students to find their pathway to success.

Please join me in supporting investment in all of Oregon's public school students, including those in our public charter schools. At this inflection point, we can come together as champions for public education, put aside past differences, and build authentic and impactful partnerships. Let's optimize this moment by putting students at the center of this conversation.

Ultimately, it is a matter of equity, and Oregon's children are the ones who pay the price. Charter schools can offer an alternative for children who learn in different ways. If a family is considering their neighborhood school, or a charter school that is better addressing their child's needs, shouldn't we ensure that the public school they choose is adequately funded to help them thrive?

Again, I appreciate your work on this issue, and thank you for the opportunity to be here today.