

Joint Student Success Committee

April 11, 2019

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

HB 2019

Co-Chair Roblan, Co-Chair Smith Warner and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for your work on the Joint Committee on Student Success.

I am here today advocating for bullying prevention and youth empowerment.

My name is Verna Wise Matthews and I am Executive Director of Ophelia's Place. We are a prevention based non-profit dedicated to empowering youth. We are glad to see that the JCSS has prioritized social-emotional learning and development, behavioral health, improved school climate and trauma informed practices while considering SB 180 and HB 2019.

We strongly believe that to provide a safe and healthy place for students to focus on meeting education requirements, bullying prevention is a necessity. And, bullying prevention curriculum requires a holistic approach that includes giving students, parents and educators the information and tools to work together to give students the support, empowerment and critical thinking skills to decrease the number of bullying incidents in school and online.

We know a holistic approach works and we would like that reflected in your legislation.

Since 2007, Ophelia's Place has been partnering with middle and high schools to provide bullying prevention and youth empowerment programs to students, staff, and parents. Between 2014 and 2017, we conducted a three-year comparative study of our full school partnership program. When comparing partnership schools to schools we hadn't partnered with:

- student's self-esteem was higher
- students felt more supported by their peers
- and peer victimization was lower.

We understand that by giving schools the tools to create a safer place for students to learn and grow, there's research that shows a positive causal effect on graduation rates, absenteeism and grades. And a prevention program allows those with greater social-emotional needs to be

easier to identify and help, and it is much cheaper and more effective than most intervention models.

While Ophelia's Place is one organization that can provide bullying prevention programs to schools, organizations like Girls Inc., Stand for Courage, Polk County Mental Health, Domestic Violence agencies and the Sheriff's offices in some counties are facilitating behavioral support groups. For schools that don't have local agencies to access, a bi-annual bullying prevention conference would provide all secondary schools in Oregon the chance to learn about proven models, gain skills, and find resources.

In conclusion we support SB 180 because we're worried that this powerful holistic prevention approach will get lost in the all-encompassing HB 2019. However, should the committee on student success decide to make HB 2019 your primary vehicle for supporting schools and our kids:

- I strongly advocate for you to integrate the provisions of SB 180 more clearly into the bill if it is the will of the committee to move this comprehensive package. Youth empowerment and "bullying prevention" language should be included that speaks to measurable impacts on self-esteem, peer victimization and supports to youth.
- I would also like to stress the importance including language outlining the use a holistic student-parent-educator approach to improve school climates within the bill.
- And for very low cost, a state-wide bullying prevention and youth empowerment conference should be held at least every other year attended by someone from every school district to share best practices, resources and bring colleagues from other states in to help Oregon educators be fully empowered to help our students in this area. The conference too should be mentioned in the bill.

I believe at least three of the major outcomes you are seeking in this bill – improved graduation rates, improved attendance rates, and more youth meeting 9th-grade on track goals – will be positively impacted by investments in youth empowerment.

Prevention is the key to laying the foundation for safe and healthy school environments. Please support SB 180.