



## Oregon Foster Families First Urges a YES on SB 828

**Background:** Oregon Foster Families First advocates for public policy changes that focus on reforming Oregon's foster care system and encouraging accountability and transparency in the program. For the 2019 Legislative session, OFFF's approach to addressing the myriad of issues facing foster families and children is to bring think-outside-the-box solutions to lawmakers so you might be able to better address key concerns and remove obstacles that impede the educational success of a child in foster care.

OFFF would like to bring to your attention an issue around providing equitable education options for children who are wards of the state. It's been long discussed in the Legislature that children in foster care are worse off academically than their peers. They tend to score lower on tests and graduate at a worse rate than children who live in stable homes. This is particularly exacerbated for teenage children in long-term foster care whose moves from placement to placement increases instability. We also know that placements for teen children become more difficult as children are closer to aging out of the system. Senate Bill 828 seeks to address both concerns of education equity issues and a solution for an alternative to foster teen placement in one bill.

**Solution:** OFFF believes the state has a responsibility to make all education opportunities available to children in foster care. We appreciate previous bills supporting foster kids with requirements for increased participation in after-school activities. We can tell you anecdotally; this has been impactful. We're now asking the Legislature to consider SB 828 to allow an academically-qualified foster student in high school to be allowed to use available K-12 education dollars and other publicly available funds, including foster care placement dollars, for the purpose of an accredited foreign exchange program.

We know students are enriched by foreign travel abroad. They are more likely to learn a language, be better global thinkers, and more engaged in their own learning. Service clubs like Rotary offer safe exchange programs, and numerous academic programs can take a child from Oregon to a far-reaching sister city in China, or even a semester at sea. The cost of these programs, including airfare and travel costs, are on par with the value of state school funding allocated to districts on behalf of foster students and the cost DHS would otherwise spend on foster care placements. For foster teens, who are more difficult to place, SB 828 also provides a unique alternative to a year of being shuffled between placements and a life-changing educational opportunity that would otherwise be out of reach.

We have heard concerns that school districts may feel like they'd lose education dollars for foster students should Oregon's Department of Education expend the dollars in the manner prescribed by SB 828. We simply don't believe that to be the case. First, SB 828 requires that a child have at least six months in foster placement prior to participating in an exchange. The sad reality is, many of these kids will move between school districts in the course of that six months. Districts already lose those dollars whenever a new foster child placement lands a child into a new district. Additionally, a child whose family can afford a foreign exchange wouldn't count towards the ADM allocation made to a district from the state school fund, so there is no real loss to a school district for the state to expend funds in this manner.

When we think about kids sleeping in hotel rooms, or in out-of-state facilities, for lack of safe placement, we hope the committee will agree that a positive placement, like a foreign exchange experience, would be better for the long-term health and educational well-being of these teens who have been entrusted to the state. This is a new way to look at a productive way to use tax resources while meeting the needs of foster students. Because these funds are already dollars budgeted on behalf of teens in foster care, repurposing them for a foreign exchange should be cost-neutral to the budget.

On behalf of our OFFF Board, we would like to thank Senators Roblan, Thatcher, and Thomsen for sponsoring this measure.

Sincerely,

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