



Testimony in Opposition to SB 1049, Attacks on Educator Benefits

Capital Construction Committee

Jim Fotter, Oregon Education Association Executive Director, May 14th, 2019

Co-Chairs Girod and Holvey, members of the Committee, for the record my name is Jim Fotter and I am the executive director of the Oregon Education Association. We represent more than 45,000 educators across Oregon in K-12 schools and community colleges. I am here today to speak in opposition to Senate Bill 1049, which would make significant cuts to Oregon educators' retirement benefits and take us backwards.

This is a bad idea, plain and simple. You can't improve schools by losing educators, and that's exactly what will happen should this bill become law. The average starting salary for an Oregon teacher is \$36,097, according to the Oregon School Boards Association -- among the lowest in the nation. Oregon teachers make 22% less than workers with comparable work experience and education in the private sector. Just across the river to the north in Washington State, teachers and educators earn far more every year. Many of our brilliant young teachers are considering leaving Oregon to work in Washington, as reported on by OPB and other news outlets.

The legislature's own analysis from Milliman shows this bill would amount to a cut of between 7 and 12.5% to educators' individual account programs or IAPs. Research shows secure retirements keep experienced educators in the classroom. Secure retirements are also essential to our school districts' ability to recruit and retain the best and brightest educators to work with students, especially at a time when the job in the classroom keeps getting harder. Another example -- we're losing our pipeline of teachers. In the last decade, only half as many college students are majoring in education fields to go into education.

We agree the unfunded actuarial liability needs to be addressed, but it should not be done through cuts to educator benefits. This is a debt problem, not a benefits problem. OPRSP, the current system in place, is already fiscally sustainable. The unfunded liability is due to the stock market crash in 2008, not overly generous benefits. We simply cannot afford to make teaching and working in our schools a less desirable profession.

Everyone has a story about their favorite teacher from their childhood, and what a difference they made in their lives. Think of that person. For me, it was my 6th grade teacher, Michael Norman. He inspired me to also enter the public education profession where I also served as a 6th grade teacher. I know that we must not go backwards and make cuts to educators' benefits, or teachers like Michael will leave the profession.

Please oppose this bill. You cannot improve schools by reducing benefits for educators.