

2.1.20

Dear Committee Chair Sen. Wagner, Vice-Chair Sen. Thomsen, members Sen. Hass, Sen. Gelser, and Sen. Heard:

As a former school counselor who worked for the Eugene 4J School District for almost twenty years, I am writing to encourage you to vote in favor of HB 1572 which would do away with the Essential Skills mandate. From its inception, the Essential Skills mandate has been a burden on students, school staff, and on school budgets.

When the Oregon Department of Education first proposed the Essential Skills mandate, school counselors from the 4J, Springfield, and Bethel School Districts in Eugene met with then Oregon State Superintendent, Susan Castillos to warn her of the impacts this mandate would have on vulnerable populations. We predicted that the students who would have the hardest time with the Essential Skills mandates would be the same students who have historically struggled in schools, namely students on IEP's, students of color, and students from lower income families.

Over the years that we have been implementing this mandate, we have watched students from these constituencies go through the humiliation of taking and retaking the Smarter Balance tests with the haunting fear that they were "never going to be able to pass it." These students would be taken out of classes repeatedly which would be a disruption to their learning, and it would take away from other more relevant and engaging curricula.

For students who could not pass the tests, which many students couldn't, they would be required to join an Essential Skills class. In this class they would be required to demonstrate their mastery of the subject matter through a portfolio process if they wanted to graduate. Students forced into these classes often would feel marginalized and stressed, and they would miss out on being able to take other, more interesting or relevant classes, which for some was the only reason they came to school.

To provide teachers to teach the Essential Skills classes, schools are forced to take precious FTE away from their content and electives areas. In addition, teachers are commandeered away from teaching to serve as test proctors causing additional disruptions and stress. Many schools use FTE to hire a 'testing coordinator' whose job it is to implement and track the Essential Skills, again taking away from schools' overall FTE. I have no idea how much has been spent on this Essential Skills mandate, but I am sure that it is in the tens of millions of dollars.

Who is benefiting from these mandates? What purpose do they serve? If anything, they have decreased the amount of teaching time and increased the amount of stress, most egregiously upon our most vulnerable students. For these reasons, I urge you to vote yes on HB 1572 and do away with this onerous mandate.

Sincerely,

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