



November 15, 2021

TO: Senate Education Committee
FR: Superintendent Darin Drill, Cascade School District
RE: 2021-22 school year reopening

Good afternoon Chair Dembrow and members of the Senate Education Committee.

My name is Darin Drill and I am the Superintendent of the Cascade School District. I am also the past president of the Oregon Association of School Executives and am here today on behalf of more than 2,500 COSA members across Oregon.

I want to start by acknowledging the superhuman efforts of ODE Director Colt Gill in supporting school districts, families and students during this pandemic. His unwavering leadership, and singular focus on serving our students has earned the respect of superintendents across Oregon.

I want to offer some statewide perspective on issues facing school districts and ESDs this school year. But first, I will share what is happening in my district and remind everyone listening that our primary focus needs to be on meeting the needs of all our students and offering in-person instruction with a minimum of disruptions.

I have been the Superintendent in Cascade for 14 years. Our community is conservative in nature and they strongly support their public schools - they are the center of our community.

The past 18 months have been the most challenging of my career. Although we were able to return to in-person learning part time this past March, it was not easy. To make a return to in-person learning possible our district has had to implement multiple health and safety protocols like masking and social distancing and provide near constant communications with students, staff, parents and community members.

There has been backlash from a small number of community members, but conversations and relationships are key to moving forward. As is maintaining a singular focus on keeping kids in school in-person, every day. While many folks are rightly concerned about the lost learning time and impact on academics, our biggest concern has been the social, emotional, and mental health challenges our students have faced. Students are hurting and they won't be able to learn if their basic needs are not met.

Before I share some of the feedback from around the state, I want to comment on recent news headlines. Last week, the Newberg School Board voted to terminate Superintendent Joe Morelock without cause. From COSA's perspective, it is not possible to justify this action based on his job performance and outcomes for students. It spotlights deeper issues when it comes to Board decision making, legal rights of employees, and, most importantly, the work we must all do to achieve racial equity and belonging for every single student in our public schools. We

appreciate that the Legislature will be considering bills in February to help address these types of situations and look forward to engaging with you on these critical efforts.

During the month of October, the COSA team hosted 11 virtual regional meetings across Oregon. More than 250 superintendents and COSA members participated and engaged in a wide-ranging discussion about public education in Oregon. One of the questions we posed to our members was: *What are the biggest leadership challenges you are facing in your district and community?*

Some of the feedback we received at these meetings was near universal across all districts, large or small, urban or rural. Consistently, COSA heard:

- Student stress, anxiety and other mental health challenges are at an all-time high
- Navigating “culture wars” is extremely challenging and distracts educators from their core mission of serving students and communities;
- “COVID fatigue” is becoming a challenge to continued implementation of masking and other health and safety mandates;
- Staffing shortages and workforce challenges exist at all grade levels, including
 - Chronic shortages of substitute teachers, bus drivers, nutrition & support staff
 - An insufficient preparation pipeline for the next generation of educators
 - Difficulty recruiting and retaining staff, particularly racially and linguistically diverse staff
 - Wages not proving competitive in the current job market, and
 - Staff fatigue and stress at an all-time high
- A call for school board members to receive governance and student equity training; and
- Continued investments with an equity focus on historically underserved students led at the local level, including BIPOC and tribal students, ESL students, students with disabilities & students navigating poverty.

Superintendents and administrators look forward to collaborating with the Legislature as we continue to focus students in all the work that we do. We appreciate the opportunity to share our perspectives about the school year so far.