



Oregon School Employees Association

www.osea.org

State Office: 4735 Liberty Rd S, Salem, OR 97302-5036

P: 800/252-6732, 503/588-0121 F: 503/588-8307

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House Interim Special Committee on Covid-19 Response
Rep. Maxine Dexter, Chair

Chair Dexter and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Lisa Gourley and I'm the president of the Oregon School Employees Association (OSEA). As you know, OSEA represents more than 23,000 Oregon educators in nearly all levels of public education, including Head Start programs, K-12 school districts, ESDs and community colleges. OSEA members perform many of the tasks that keep Oregon public schools safe and functional for students, administrators and teachers.

Reopening Oregon schools to full-time, in-person instruction has been, as we anticipated, quite challenging. You're familiar with the current concerns about masks, vaccines and an education workforce that is barely holding on. I want to remind you all today *why* that workforce situation is so dire. It's not a sudden or unforeseen occurrence, and while all aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic have worsened the situation, it was entirely foreseeable that we would reach this point.

I've been an educator for many years. OSEA has members who've been working for their school districts in excess of 40 years in some cases. We do that because of our deep love for Oregon's children, how personally fulfilling it is to see our young people learn and grow, and because for a lot of people, for a long time, jobs as school employees were better than they are now.

Thirty years of disinvestment in Oregon schools, even with the Student Success Act of 2019 and even without this pandemic, have devastated the education workforce. Not enough adults per student, not enough training, not enough hours to do the work that educators know they should be doing, and a general disrespect for educators at all levels, which we've seen increase alarmingly just recently. But that existed before the pandemic too, when educational assistants were told there wasn't money for safety equipment for those working with especially high-needs students and dealing with that was just part of the job. The culture of disinvestment and disrespect started long before the pandemic, but now we're trying to navigate the cumulative effects of all these things.

But I'm not here to spread doom and gloom, or tell you that hope is lost. I want to be realistic that *the situation in Oregon schools is actually as bad as you can imagine*. Educators at all levels are approaching a level of burnout from which they will not return if we don't get help to our schools in a hurry. But, there is hope. If we can take thoughtful steps to *show them* that the cavalry is coming, if they hang on a little longer, then we can stabilize our existing educator workforce and buy time to make the larger changes and investments that are needed to appropriately staff Oregon

schools into the future. We need to show meaningful progress, not more promises that go unsatisfied every biennium.

Working with our colleagues from the organizations on this panel and other allies, we'll be bringing forward specific recommendations for reducing the strain on existing educators at all levels of the system, and encouraging new and returning educators to fill vacancies that need filling now. To spotlight one priority: It is foolish to believe that when a fast food restaurant offers \$16 per hour in pay and discounted meals, any Oregonian would reasonably choose to work for a school district that pays less and exposes the worker to greater Covid risk, as well as potential danger from student behaviors. Premium pay to recruit and retain classified employees, especially in classifications with crisis-level shortages of employees like transportation, is essential to provide enough adults in schools to cover the substitute teacher shortage and not further undermine our teacher and administrator workforces. It's worth reinforcing that the shortage of trained bus drivers *was already acute before Covid-19*. Driving a school bus requires more training and certification than most Oregonians realize, and it's a hard job. So it should come as no surprise that \$3,000 signing bonuses are insufficient. Districts have been trying this for years and *they need more help*.

Last week, in a special Veterans Day message to all our represented employees, I noted that after taking that day to honor our veterans, classified employees need to take a day for themselves. Some received an extra paid day off on Friday – unheard of before the pandemic – because school leaders can see every day that our folks are barely holding on. Oregon educators are very proud, they value the important work that they do, and if they come and say we need help, they *mean* it. OSEA and others have been saying for a long time that we need help. There have been helpful responses, but also continued inadequacy in funding and support for educators. So we're saying, unequivocally we need help. With all the various impacts of the pandemic, things are worse right now than anyone would have predicted for public education in Oregon. We want to right the ship and keep delivering a good education for our children. Our folks are still here, ready to do this important work. But we need help.

Thank you,

Lisa Gourley, President
Oregon School Employees Association

