



Oregon School Employees Association

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Joint Committee on Public Education Appropriation
Sen. Lew Frederick and Rep. Susan McLain, Co-Chairs

Co-Chairs and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the draft report before this committee on behalf 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.

The timing of this report is important because public education is in the midst of a crisis – owing to the continuing pandemic and structural factors that have compounded over many years – the like of which neither educators nor any Oregonian would have predicted. But it's especially important that this report not create the impression of things being "fine" in Oregon's schools today, when the reality is a crisis. The draft report offers several areas for improvement in terms of recognizing the gravity of the situation our schools are facing today, and recognizing how the public will perceive this report.

I understand wanting to cast the Legislature's efforts as making progress and that "help is on the way." OSEA members and most Oregonians appreciate the Student Success Act (SSA) and other state efforts that are genuine progress, and we absolutely don't want to minimize or take away from those achievements. But I do have to tell you that our members do not feel like help is on the way. The report's essential conclusion – that "things are OK, they're getting there" – is really at odds with the perception among my members, who are looking desperately for signs that the cavalry is coming.

This report's effective conclusion that we're "getting close" to sufficient funding is at odds with the reality of schools and students, parents and community members, who've been insufficiently supported for many years. Recent calculations of current service level (CSL) have artificially deflated the Quality Education Model (QEM) number that relies on it, suggesting we are closer to fully funding quality schools than we really are. Figure 5 (page 11 of the draft) shows the specious idea that decreasing state resources will still cover actual costs, which is the conclusion of the currently broken calculation of CSL. And, perhaps most alarmingly and what isn't adequately discussed is this problem compounds over time. Every missed year of sufficient funding accumulates what is essentially a debt, whether in deferred maintenance of buildings, delayed upgrades in technology, compounding learning or behavioral deficits for students, burnout of staff

at various levels or other areas. Compounding needs of students over time is especially concerning because it increases the future weight on an already stretched system *in ways that are not captured by QEM modeling*. Accumulating and compounding costs in other parts of the education system are a serious and long unaddressed concern for educators as well as students and families.

The report notes in passing that "anecdotal" evidence exists for increasing severity of student needs, but not further exploring that critical topic is a clear example of this report's tendency to avoid coming to grips with the reality in schools. The special needs student population increase (page 19), which is somewhat understated by the numbers cited in the draft, is also not being addressed in the status quo because there is an arbitrary cap on the number of students that districts get additional "weight" for in their funding. That cap is already significantly exceeded, especially in large districts, and leads to reduced services for higher-needs students as well as drawing resources away from general education programs because of the dysfunctional cap. That there is no mention of the cap at all, or the failure of the status quo to address the growing need, is a good example of this draft's shortcomings in terms of recognizing how grave the status quo really is.

This is also one example of a tendency of the data points used in the draft to mask Oregon's reality. Characterizing the increase in the state's special needs student population with seemingly modest percentage changes over a short time window subtly masks that an increasing proportion *of an increasing total population* are in need of meaningful additional services that districts are legally obligated but widely under-resourced to provide. Similarly, referring to the difference between sufficient funding and where we're at – characterized as approximately 4 percent lower graduation rates – seems to conveniently ignore that 4 percent of a school system supporting almost 600,000 Oregon kids is as many as 24,000 students who won't graduate high school. If taken together, such a group would be one of the largest school districts in the state.

Finally, it is extremely frustrating to see reference to Student Success Act (SSA) dollars "offsetting" State School Fund (SSF) dollars in the calculation of what would achieve QEM sufficiency. The report notes that the number and severity of student needs has increased over time, and the SSA was crafted in recognition of that reality and was explicitly intended to augment the basic operations of our schools that the SSF provides for. The good and necessary work that advocates predicted would be possible because of the SSA, and that districts committed to their communities to pursue, was always predicated on additional funding. If the SSA is simply offsetting loss in general operations dollars, it cannot possibly lead to the promised improvement in outcomes.

In a time of obvious and indisputable crisis for Oregon schools, it's especially important that this report on funding adequacy not paint a rosier picture than the reality. To do so would endanger the credibility of the Legislature with educators as well as parents and the larger community around our schools.

OSEA and others have been saying for a long time that we need help. While there have been some helpful responses and real efforts at progress, continued inadequacy in funding and support for educators has put us in a precarious position.

We are saying, again and unequivocally, that we need help. Having this committee put forward a report that more fully articulates the depth of insufficiency in school funding and the real impacts that it is having on students, educators and our communities would be hugely meaningful. We really hope to see additional improvements in the final report from this committee, and that the final report will be one of the first steps toward the quality schools that Oregonians have been waiting for. We are ready to get there, with your help.

Thank you,

Bob Estabrook
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