

January 12, 2022

Senate Education Committee

January 12, 2022 hearing on Virtual Education

Testimony of Tricia Powell, President Oregon Virtual Public Schools Alliance,

Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Thomsen, members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Tricia Powell. I live in Roseburg. I'm the parent of two virtual public charter school students and the President of the Oregon Virtual Public Schools Alliance, a coalition of parents who have joined together to advocate for our education choice.

As the committee considers how to support Oregon students, I'm encouraged that virtual education is part of the discussion. As you know, full-time virtual public charter schools are state-approved, public school programs. They utilize state-certified teachers and curriculum. They are proven programs that have been operating in the state for more than 15 years and they are a critical option for families seeking an alternative to the traditional classroom.

A recent editorial in the Oregonian highlighted school closures and disruption due to staffing shortages in the Portland Public School District. In contrast, full-time virtual public charter schools have continued without disruption since the start of the pandemic. These schools have high teacher retention and students can learn in an environment free of the current health and safety risks that are closing schools and adversely impacting their brick-and-mortar school peers.

The editorial also noted that remote learning, isn't a replacement for in-person learning. I respectfully disagree. While the remote and distance learning programs offered in some districts may be a poor substitute for in-person learning, virtual public charter schools offer high quality curriculum and state-certified teachers who are trained to teach in an online setting. They are a good fit for those families who are seeking an alternative to the current offerings of their local school district. As school districts around the state hopscotch from, in-person learning, to remote learning, overwhelming students and teachers, established online school programs should be a valuable resource for guidance and support.

Unfortunately, policies like the 3% percent enrollment cap on full-time virtual public charter schools have prohibited thousands of Oregon students from seeking this proven education option. While access to these schools has been a challenge since the 3% enrollment cap was enacted more than 10 years ago, the pandemic has only succeeded in accelerating this problem. We heard from families in school districts around the state who were denied enrollment in virtual public charter schools during the 2020/2021 school year because their district hit the 3% cap. As a legislative body that is committed to equity, access and fairness in education, it's disappointing that access, equity and fairness seemingly don't apply to students currently enrolled or seeking to enroll in a full-time virtual public charter school.

I also find it ironic, that in a state that is home to leading technology companies like Tektronix and Intel, the Oregon education establishment shuns efforts to expand access to virtual public charter schools and make technology more readily available to our K-12 students.

We have great full-time virtual public charter schools in Oregon. They have platforms and technology in place that are working well for students. I understand that an education work will convene after the legislative session to discuss virtual education. I urge you to raise the 3% enrollment cap during the February legislative session. Waiting for the work group will be too late for many families seeking this proven online option. I would welcome the opportunity to participate in the work group to discuss the enrollment cap and any other issues related to virtual public charter schools.

Thank you for listening.