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House Education Testimony

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Good morning, Chair Alonso Leon, Vice-Chairs Neron and Weber, and members of the committee.

I'm Guadalupe Guerrero and it's my honor to serve as the Superintendent of Oregon's largest school district, Portland Public Schools. I'm also the incoming chair of the Council of the Great City Schools which, as the consortium representing the nation's 77 largest urban school districts, serves as an effective advocate for PreK-12 public education at the federal level.

In these roles, I get to visit and hear firsthand from my counterparts, both across Oregon and in other major cities. Not surprisingly, school districts everywhere are observing – and attempting to now address – the impacts of the pandemic on student learning outcomes. I'm sure you are hearing about it from the districts in your home areas, and you are also hearing from Director Gill, the impact on student learning outcomes across Oregon.

This is a shared instructional emergency. We have the opportunity to collectively respond by prioritizing additive funding for a statewide, multi-pronged emphasis on early literacy.

Mountains of research confirm that a focus on early literacy is a smart investment. Director Gill summarized some of this in his testimony, and I want to reinforce it. The school experience, beginning in preschool, should be language-rich and developmentally-appropriate. Early education should include systematic instruction in reading curriculum. Students should have access to targeted interventions, and supports informed by research and the science of reading. Our students need varied instructional approaches, high-quality instructional materials, and educators who have the opportunity to engage in professional learning

opportunities related to effective literacy instruction. And they need all of these in the primary grades, so that every child is able to meet grade level expectations and key reading proficiency benchmarks.

This is what we are trying to do in Portland Public Schools. We understand that supporting every child's ability to read proficiently sets a fundamental foundation for learning, and setting that foundation is one of our key priorities.

This involves a multi-pronged approach. We've been strategic about investing our pandemic relief funds to not only enhance direct services to our students, but also to train our educators and school leaders to implement new curriculum and instructional practices. Our early educators, from PreK to Grade 2, now have high-quality, research aligned instructional resources.

We are investing in the training of our educators so that they have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge base. Students benefit when our educators' have a clearer understanding of the components and practices of explicit and systematic reading instruction. As a school district, we have facilitated the participation of hundreds of our educators in a two-year professional course on the science of reading. And we know this work has to start as early as possible with young learners – so with additional county, state, and federal funding, we are also expanding access to preschool options.

We also have to provide targeted intervention and extended learning opportunities for our students. This past summer, our Summer Acceleration Academy boosted the unfinished learning of roughly 3,300 rising first through eighth graders. We've also set aside over \$1 million in one-time pandemic relief funding for students to receive high-dosage tutoring. Our district and school communities are marshaling all available resources to support students and to narrow opportunity gaps; our goal is to ensure every student is able to demonstrate grade level proficiency.

As both an educational leader and former literacy specialist, I am here to advocate for a coherent approach to, and comprehensive focus on, early literacy. We must align:

- professional development on evidence-based practices
- high-quality core curriculum and instructional materials
- formative and diagnostic assessments to screen for, and precisely identify, students' reading skills as early as possible – this includes screening for dyslexia.

This shift to more effective classroom practices has to be supported within a school setting that:

- implements a multi-tiered system of supports and provides access to a menu of targeted interventions and evidence-based academic supports
- makes ongoing training and professional coaching available for teachers, that includes a focus on culturally responsive practices and strategies for working effectively with multilingual students
- establishes school cultures and climates that also address our youngest learners' social emotional well-being
- has the capacity and ability to accurately assess and monitor student reading skill development.

There is no more fundamental responsibility we have as educators than making sure every child can read. Getting all of these essential ingredients in place – particularly in the primary grades – will better ensure our students experience long-term success throughout their educational careers.

I'm proud to share that as a school district, we are beginning to observe early signs of the positive impact these focused efforts are having on student learning outcomes: Last fall – 2021 – only 49% of our first-graders were proficient based on our district reading screener. This fall, that cohort is now up to 74% proficiency. And recall – these are students whose kindergarten experience was largely virtual.

Our district will continue to implement assertive measures to support our early learners and their literacy development. But we need these same types of bold measures statewide, and we need them to be additive. There is already evidence that when states adopt a comprehensive approach to reading, they observe remarkable improvements in student outcomes. I believe that improving student outcomes in Oregon will require a deep commitment – both in policy and in funding – to effective, systematic, evidence-based literacy practices in the early grades across all of our schools.

Our hope is that you will give strong consideration to bookending the focus on high school success, via Measure 98, with a parallel commitment on the front end: by prioritizing reading proficiency in the early grades. Students' opportunity to develop essential early literacy skills makes all other learning possible. And there is perhaps no stronger factor, than being a proficient reader, to positively influencing a students' educational outcomes and life trajectories.

Thank you.

