

The logo features a stylized graphic on the left with overlapping shapes in shades of blue, red, and orange. To the right, the text "OREGON PARTNERS" is in a bold, black, sans-serif font, with "for" in a smaller, black, cursive font. Below this, "EDUCATION JUSTICE" is written in the same bold, black, sans-serif font.

# OREGON PARTNERS *for* EDUCATION JUSTICE

January 27, 2021

Chair Michael Dembrow  
Vice-Chair Chuck Thomsen  
Members of the Senate Education Committee

## **RE: Supporting Community and Advancing Equity During School Reopening**

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Thomsen, and members of the Senate Education Committee,

On behalf of the Oregon Partners for Education Justice, we would like to thank you for providing an opportunity to share our experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic and school reopening efforts. We represent a cross-cultural network of community-based organizations, culturally specific service providers, and education advocates who are championing an inclusive, equitable, racially just, and community-centered public education system for Oregon. **As the Legislature grapples with how to help schools reopen safely, we believe building on Oregon's existing educational equity investments and uplifting community-driven solutions can guide the path forward.**

Many of us are working the front lines with children, students, and families who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. We have witnessed firsthand the struggle that students and their families are experiencing to simply have their basic needs met. **From East Portland to the far reaches of Eastern Oregon, historically underserved students across the state are facing overwhelming barriers to accessing the education they deserve.** As we navigate the complex challenge of reopening schools, our education system must focus support for students who are struggling with challenges like mental health, learning loss, connectivity issues, or the burden of holding a job or taking on child care to support their families through this difficult time. These are not new challenges in our communities, but they have been exacerbated over the past twelve months.

**In the midst of overlapping crises like last year’s wildfires, the ongoing pandemic, and longstanding racial injustice, Oregon must listen to communities who are most impacted and prioritize equity in any decisions and investments that facilitate school reopening.** With the Student Success Act (SSA), Oregon has a tremendous advantage. The SSA reflects a shared commitment by the state and schools to work in true partnership with local communities as they target support for historically underserved students, expand access to mental health supports, and close persistent inequities.

**Recommitting to strong school-community partnerships and the Student Success Act itself will be critical to reopening schools safely and successfully for all students.** No two Oregon communities are alike, and a one-size-fits-all approach to reopening won’t work within a school district nor across the state. Authentic partnership between school districts and local communities is crucial to not only understanding unique challenges and designing comprehensive plans, but also to implement school reopening. Community-based organizations hold trusted relationships with students and families that school districts sometimes lack, and can provide schools with essential data, expertise, and services to ensure every child’s needs are met when transitioning to in-person learning. Indeed, school districts have already credited community-based organizations with helping historically underserved students in Oregon’s Class of 2020 graduate in record numbers.

**The SSA can be a critical tool to ensuring that school reopening is responsive to the needs of all Oregon children—especially Black children, Indigenous children, children of color, low-income children, children living with disability, children in rural communities, and far too many more who are underserved by our education system.** The Student Investment Account within the SSA represents the state’s largest equity investment in Oregon schools. It provides targeted support to expand mental and behavioral health services and to reduce academic disparities affecting historically underserved students; and, most importantly, it requires local school districts to engage impacted students and families to inform these investments. The SSA also funds the Black African/American, Latinx, and American Indian/Alaskan Native student success advisory groups to inform statewide, culturally specific strategies. These are just a few examples of state policies that intentionally involve communities as true partners in decision-making. Investing in ongoing community engagement across Oregon’s education system and building partnerships with trusted community-based

organizations will help ensure that historically underserved students are not left behind during school reopenings and beyond.

Oregon cannot return to status quo. The steps we take to reopen schools must continue Oregon’s progress toward a more inclusive, equitable, and racially just education system. We ask you to **support the community-identified solutions outlined in the Oregon Partners for Education Justice 2021 Legislative Agenda**—solutions that will guide an equitable transition to in-person learning and strengthen Oregon’s public education system generations to come.

Sincerely,

**Oregon Partners for Education Justice**

Adelante Mujeres

Unite Oregon

Black Parent Initiative

Consejo Hispano

Asian Family Center

Africa House

Early Literacy Success Alliance

Self Enhancement, Inc.

Foundations for a Better Oregon

Oregon Business Council

Immigrant and Refugee Community

Organization (IRCO)

Asian Pacific American Network of

Oregon (APANO)

FACT Oregon

Latino Network

Coalition of Communities of Color

Oregon Student Voice

EUVALCREE

REAP, Inc.

Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality

Children’s Institute

Stand for Children Oregon

Native American Youth and Family

Center (NAYA)

Oregon Coalition of Community

Charter Schools (ORC3S)

# OREGON PARTNERS *for* EDUCATION JUSTICE

## 2021 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Across Oregon, families, educators, and communities are stepping up to make sure children aren't left behind. Now is the time to rethink how Oregon's public education system works with communities to support children and families who are disproportionately impacted by school closures and the ongoing injustice of systemic racism.

This community-driven agenda charts Oregon's next steps toward building an inclusive, equitable, and just public education system during and beyond COVID-19. **During the 2021 Legislative Session, the Oregon Legislature can make a difference in the lives of historically underserved children and families with policies and investments that:**

- Ensure distance learning and school reopening is fully accessible, engaging, and culturally responsive.
- Ensure every child has access to high-quality, culturally sustaining early learning opportunities.
- Promote anti-racist learning environments where every child feels like they belong.
- Recognize how critical community partners support children's unique learning, social, emotional, and cultural needs.

**As Gov. Kate Brown proposed in her Recommended Budget for 2021-23, fully funding the landmark Student Success Act (SSA) is a clear path toward prioritizing equity as a core value of our public education system.** By building on the promise of the SSA, we can create a public education system that works for all—especially Black children, Indigenous children, children of color, low-income children, children in rural communities, and far too many more who are underserved by the system as it stands.

### WHO WE ARE

Oregon Partners for Education Justice is a cross-cultural network of community-based organizations, culturally specific service providers, and education advocates who are championing a racially just and community-centered public education system for Oregon. We believe in the vision, wisdom, and leadership of impacted communities, and advocate for equitable policies and investments that eliminate disparities and empower historically underserved children.

# **I. BUILD ON THE STUDENT SUCCESS ACT AS A FOUNDATION FOR EQUITY**

## **SSA Early Learning Account**

- Prioritize funding to expand access to **high-quality, culturally sustaining early learning programs**, including culturally specific early childhood and kindergarten transition programs.
- Prioritize investment in **professional development and pay equity for the early childhood workforce**.

## **SSA Student Investment Account**

- Prioritize investments that **target support for historically underserved students**, who are now disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.
- Prioritize investments in **culturally responsive mental and behavioral health services** in partnership with communities.
- Require school districts to **engage historically underserved students and families in local planning and budgeting decisions**.

## **SSA Statewide Initiatives**

- Prioritize investment in **Summer Learning Grants for Title I schools** to mitigate learning loss for low-income students, which is exacerbated by school closures.
- Increase investment in **Oregon's statewide equity plans**—including the **Black/African American, Latino/a/x, American Indian/Alaska Native Student Success Plans**—to honor community self-determination and invest in community-based organizations as partners supporting students.
- Support the **Educator Advancement Council** and other policies to recruit, train, and retain a **racially diverse educator workforce**; develop a statewide **anti-racism initiative for educators**; and create an **Indigenous Educators Institute**.

## **II. HOLD OUR PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM ACCOUNTABLE TO ALL STUDENTS**

- To successfully implement Oregon’s statewide Ethnic Studies standards, **invest in anti-racist curriculum development and professional development for educators.**
- To effectively support every child’s social and emotional learning (SEL), **direct the State Board of Education to adopt equitable SEL content standards and provide technical assistance to school districts for implementation.**
- To ensure schools are effectively measuring student progress and success, **adopt an inclusive process to review Oregon’s high school graduation and “Essential Skills” requirements.**
- To prepare every young person for the future, **expand career-connected learning and youth employment opportunities (including STEM access) for historically underserved students.**
- To ensure the diverse and unique cultural traditions of our students are respected and celebrated, **allow tribal regalia to be worn at graduation ceremonies and school events.**
- To honor the many cultures of Oregon’s students and expand access to electives, **allow students to fulfill high school language arts requirements in languages other than English or through English Language Learner coursework.**
- To create a more coherent and equitable resourcing strategy for Oregon’s public education system, **increase transparency and accountability in how State School Fund dollars are spent at the local level.**

## **III. LIFT UP COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS IN A SHARED COMMITMENT TO EQUITY**

Advancing equity requires including impacted communities in the policy process, from design to implementation to evaluation. This agenda stands in solidarity with communities across Oregon who are advocating for an equitable and racially just public education system for children during the 2021 Legislative Session:

**Reimagine Oregon** is uplifting policy solutions to stop the school to prison pipeline by addressing hate and bias incidents through Oregon’s anti-bullying laws; eliminating in-school arrests and zero tolerance discipline policies; and diverting funding from punitive measures to restorative justice practices.

**Oregon’s Early Childhood Coalition** is advocating for policies that address racial disparities in access to culturally responsive early learning opportunities, including eliminating suspension and expulsion in early care and education programs; mandating an Early Childhood Equity in Access report; urging Congress to keep children safe from ICE in early childhood settings; and supporting the creation of a Tribal Early Learning Hub to consult directly with Oregon’s nine federally recognized tribes.

# OREGON PARTNERS *for* EDUCATION JUSTICE

We envision a racially just, community-centered public education system that supports every child with equitable access to safe, inclusive, and welcoming learning environments, ensuring all children in Oregon are empowered to grow into thriving global citizens.



Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality

