



OREGON COALITION OF COMMUNITY CHARTER SCHOOLS

TO: Members of the House Education Committee

From: Jon Bullock, executive director of Redmond Proficiency Academy and Board Chair of the Oregon Coalition of Community Charter Schools

Date: June 3, 2021

Good Afternoon Vice Chairs Neron and Weber and members of the House Education Committee, my name is Jon Bullock and I serve as the executive director of the Redmond Proficiency Academy (a 6th - 12th grade public charter school serving students in Central Oregon) and as the board chair for the Oregon Coalition of Community Charter Schools (whose mission is to provide a voice, sustainable support and guidance for community charter schools across Oregon.)

I would also like to add that I have spent the past 25 years working in Oregon's public schools as a teacher, a coach, and an administrator, and I am a product of Oregon's public school system. I grew up in rural poverty in Southern Oregon and were it not for public educators in Oregon, I would not have gone to college and I would not be talking with you today. I am a staunch supporter of our public schools and believe that high quality charter schools are an essential component of our public school system.

I appreciate you having me here today to talk about public charter schools in our state and about the role our coalition plays in supporting high-quality community charter schools.

Members of our organization are part of a community of educators and stakeholders who believe in the transformative power of schools to change the lives of young people and are certain that chartering can encourage innovation in the organization and programs of all public schools.

Charter schools were created as laboratories of innovation, and while innovating at public charter schools we also seek out opportunities for collaboration with school districts, other public charter schools, and other educational entities. We welcome opportunities to learn from and exchange ideas with our colleagues. It is our sincere hope that the lessons gleaned from our experiences can help inform the work of our colleagues within school districts. We understand the value of collaboration and believe that partnerships between charter schools and school districts and between charter schools and the communities they serve are critical to ensure all of Oregon's public school students receive the high-quality education they need and that they deserve.

As with all schools, public and private, public charter schools faced many challenges over the last year. There has been variability in how schools have fared overall, how students and families experienced their education this past year, and what types of supports schools needed and continue to need.

To share how that has played out I want to begin by providing some additional context that can help you understand the successes and challenges of our community based charter schools over the last 16 months.

Many of the challenges our schools have faced have been exacerbated by the states' decades long underfunding of public charter schools.

The National Alliance of Public Charter Schools describes Oregon's charter school situation as one that "needs significant work on ensuring equitable operational funding and equitable access to capital funding and facilities." I want to share with you the realities of that financial situation and how that can impact the student experience on the ground.

Oregon's public charter schools receive approximately half (50 cents for each dollar) of what a district run school has access, per pupil, through their combination of state school fund, various state grants in aid, and local bonds and levies. In short: we operate with nearly half the per pupil funding of an average district run school.

In addition to fewer financial resources public charter schools face enormous PERS obligations, far greater than many of our school districts, whose challenges are often documented in the media. Charter schools are considered small independent public employers, which are required by statute to participate in (PERS). Currently public charter schools, for the purposes of PERS, are categorized in the School District Pool (Rate Code 3000) and pay that standard rate not the rate of their authorizing school district. The difference between the "School District Pool" rate and that of many authorizing districts is significant and creates a tremendous financial burden for public charter schools and threatens the sustainability of many.

For example:

- The current PERS rate paid by charter schools for their employees is 26.58% (for OSPR/Tier III--which are the majority of employees at public charter schools)
- Comparatively, the PERS rates paid by select authorizing school districts are:
 - Portland Public SD is at 3.36%
 - North Clackamas is at 11.3%
 - Redmond, my authorizing school district, is at 17.83%. While not as low as some, significantly lower than our schools.

As you can see these differences are significant and are that much more impactful because we don't have the economies of scale that many districts do to manage these costs.

During the pandemic the federal government has provided an overwhelming amount of financial supports for public education, but Oregon's means for ensuring the inclusion of public charter schools in that funding was often unclear, difficult to navigate in many school districts, and has led to variability in whether, and how much funding, public charter schools have received from these federal support funds.

The challenges faced by so many charter schools during the pandemic led to:

- uncertainty about their ability to purchase necessary supplies for students to engage in distance learning, such as tablets, wifi hotspots, even printing for take home packets was challenging given the cost and our available financial resources
- We are experiencing challenges in retaining staff due to constraints on our ability to increase teacher salary
- recruitment of students has been difficult due to several factors: closure of community based organization offices that are partners of ours, uncertainty about school structure in the fall, and general difficulty reaching potential students and families through our traditional means
- Following state guidance has been difficult as school districts have varied in how they have opted to re-open, often not in consultation with the charter schools within their district.

In addition to the operational challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, many of our schools were heavily impacted by the wildfires that ravaged many parts of the state last summer.

We know that at least 100 public charter school students and their families lost homes and all of the devices they'd been using to access their education at the time, many of our school staff lost their homes, and students experienced severe mental and emotional stress. Our schools stepped in and became mini social service providers -- building on their experiences during the early months of the pandemic, when they developed food banks, provided childcare for essential workers, and helped their families access benefits such as pandemic-EBT and unemployment insurance, they leaned in and raised funds to replace that which the families in their school community lost. For example, Kids Unlimited Academy, in Southern Oregon, worked in partnership with local business and supporters to acquire and renovate abandoned duplexes into new homes for many of the families who'd lost their homes in the fire. This is the spirit of community and innovation that we celebrate in our public charter schools.

You may also want to know how, specifically, did our community based charter schools respond and what was the student experience during the pandemic school year.

As I mentioned earlier students at public charter schools had varying experiences. Almost immediately after schools closed, we began to see anecdotal evidence that charter schools were reacting quickly and serving students well. We heard about charter school leaders who were able to resume instruction in as little as 48 hours. Sometimes, the solutions were technology enabled, moving everyone online quickly. At other schools, where families lacked digital devices and access to internet connectivity, charter school leaders used other creative solutions like broadcasting lessons on public access television stations and setting up grab and go stations for families to pick up lesson packets. Teachers kept in touch with students and parents by text message, email, and phone calls. Many also figured out a way to continue providing meals and other community resources, not only to their own students but also to the entire community.

Charter schools kept students directly engaged with staff throughout the spring. We have seen a few ways that schools shifted their operations to maintain student-school connections and center on student support. Here are a few examples.

1. **Prioritizing relationships and outreach:** All the charter schools prioritized student and family outreach from the moment schools closed. Rather than using distance as a reason to step back, staff at our schools found new ways to connect and ensure students were safe and learning.
2. **Expanding the role of school:** In addition to educating students and providing their normal array of student supports, charter schools quickly expanded their role to meet students' and families' urgent, basic needs. They have rallied partners, vendors, and private philanthropy who in turn helped families pay rent, put dinner on the table, apply for benefits, and access mental health care.
3. **Continuing academic learning:** The challenges to continued learning over the year have been tremendous. Nonetheless, our charter schools took steps to keep providing rigorous academic learning, even as they adjusted expectations for students, given the demands and realities of at-home learning during a pandemic. Our school leaders see continued academic learning as a source of social-emotional support for students.
4. **Adapting how learning happens:** Many of our charter schools had to redesign the way they deliver instruction. They landed on different models, with some following a structured daily schedule with live sessions and others relying on asynchronous instruction to maximize flexibility. Despite these differences, our schools share a belief that effective at-home learning included more than just posting online assignments that students would have otherwise completed in class.
5. **Implementing a feedback loop:** School leaders knew they would not immediately get everything right. In response, they invited students and families to share feedback and adjusted quickly to improve.

We are proud of the ways that our community based charter schools leaned in to support students, their families, and surrounding communities during both the pandemic

and wildfires. At RPA, for example, we stood up a community food pantry and distributed over 10,000 meals to students, families, and community members. RPA, like other public schools in our coalition and throughout the state, conducted outreach to students and families to ensure that students had the necessary technology and connectivity to engage in distance learning.

Through the pandemic, public charter school teachers and staff members took to heart the RSSL guiding principles of:

- Ensure safety and wellness
- Cultivate connection and relationship
- Center equity
- Innovate

The ability to make the shifts and put in place the supports mentioned previously have helped our students stay engaged, connected to a caring adult in their school community, and will prepare them for a more full-time return to their usual school program in the fall.

Looking toward the coming school year we are eager to take time to learn lessons from the experiences of the past year, apply new innovations within our school communities, and welcome students back with enthusiasm. We know that the Oregon Department of Education has worked very hard over the last year to help support schools and provide guidance on how to have “ready schools and safe learners.” The last school year was ever evolving, as health metrics changed and state guidance changed public charter schools (as all schools did) had to pivot on a dime. Going from all comprehensive distance learning to limited in person to hybrids based on county metrics always seemed to happen overnight and caused schools to constantly be in modification mode..

Now, as the department is preparing for the start of next school year they are in the process of developing new requirements for schools and we are concerned that these new requirements will come too late, be overly prescriptive and hinder the ability for our public charter schools to continue to provide the innovative educational programs that we’re known for.

ODEs newest guidance is set to be finalized in July, just mere weeks before many schools bring their educators back for pre-session planning and in some cases just a month prior to schools opening their doors to students. In particular, the proposed new requirement for 50% synchronous instruction, under Division 22, would be a massive shift in the educational model for many types of charters schools: proficiency based learning schools, personalized learning schools, Oregon’s first Recovery High School for students with substance use disorder, and high schools with youth reengagement & dropout prevention models, to name a few. Not only is making a shift of that size next to

impossible it misses the mark on supporting public charter schools to develop and implement non-traditional educational models to meet students needs. We will be providing formal comment on the new draft guidelines and will ensure you all are provided that information as well.

So, as you asked “what supports do public charter schools need,” there are a myriad, given the context of what I’ve share with you here are a few of note that would greatly enhance our ability to provide rich experiences for students:

- Adequate and equitable access to state school fund resources
- Access to state grants in aid and facilities funding
- Clear, inclusive, and logical guidance from the Department of Education that allows the flexibility for the innovative program models that charter schools are intended to provide
- Embracing innovative practices and updating statute and administrative rules to support those practices
- Encouraging and truly supporting partnerships between public charter schools and sponsoring districts
- Protecting the autonomy created in the original authorizing statute for charter schools, by creating the exact same requirements for district run and public charter schools we only serve to make a duplicative system of public education and negates our ability to innovate and provide specialized school experiences of choice in our communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding public charter schools in Oregon how we’ve navigated the last 16 months. My colleague, Iris, will share with you the ways in which our charter schools always, and during the pandemic, engage with various student and family populations. I am also happy to answer any questions you may have.