

My name is Arlo Ryan-Keohane and I reside in Oak Grove. I speak to you as parent with more than 2 decades of experience with family law courts in Oregon. I am writing in support of HB 2948. I believe most folks in a position like mine have become so despondent they won't speak up. It's easy to get fed up with the system; frankly, I struggle to write this, even now. Thinking that my words don't matter because people only listen to "credentialed experts". It is the thought that my children will benefit more from my speaking than they would from my silence that motivates me to offer testimony. To give context to this matter, I must discuss some personal history; and—because I'm terrible at this—I ask your forbearance and compassion. My oldest is 24 now, and recently had a child of his own. His mother had sole legal and physical custody for most of his upbringing; she took him as a young child when we split up, threatening me with never seeing him again because she would just tell the court I'm abusive. I feel confident now that my interactions with our son were only acceptable to her as long as they were on her terms—that she be in control. I worked hard to stay involved, despite the distance, and was able to obtain visitation after a long legal fight. In recent conversations, our son has talked about how his mother's addiction was and is a problem. It seems so unlikely that a parent with such issues would be considered "the better parent" and granted custody time and again. To the typical person, this must sound like a TV drama, and I would have agreed if it were not my life. I have another child, who will be entering teenaged years soon. We are in what folks politely describe as a "high-conflict" situation. What this means is their mother wants nothing to do with me, and wants the same for our child. Because of the closeness of our child with their mother, they would rather not see me. This is the "parental alienation" some talk about: that as I am made unfamiliar and undesirable, the possibility of having that relationship is diminished. Over the past 10 years we have returned to court time and again, as I am determined to be the best parent possible. This means, at least being in my children's lives. As a final example, our child needed a minor surgery last month. I didn't know about it, and was caught unawares when they mentioned it during a phone call. Imagine being a young child and having your parent not know you were going into a scary situation like that. Would you feel that your parent cared? That your parent had your best interests at heart? This is relevant to the issue at hand because, as sole custody-holder, that parent gets to make all the decisions. I recognize—according to the testimony offered in the hearing by legal experts—there are "just 3 issues" that the custodial parent decides, but it ends up being a greater share than that. By holding those three, a custodial parent can hold so much over the head of non-custodial parents. Visitation becomes a "medical decision" during a pandemic. Without a say in the matter, non-custodial parents don't need to be consulted, which becomes "they don't need to be informed." If the judge were able to grant joint legal custody, and thought that best in our case, it could make a tremendous difference for our child. This bill does not mandate a judge to do anything, it only allows the judge to make a decision; this is why we have family law judges, to decide for people having trouble doing so. I also disagree, and find it distasteful, that "this could make more work for courts" would be used as a rationale for denying families what they need. I propose this indicates other changes must be made to accompany these to improve a system which has failed families.