

Prepared remarks for a hearing on House Bill 3236
Oregon State House Committee on Education
March 9, 2021
Dr. Lorna Fast Buffalo Horse

Good afternoon Chair Alonso Leon, Vice Chairs Neron and Weber, and members of the committee. My name is Lorna Fast Buffalo Horse and I was invited to share some thoughts about my professional experience in the field of alternative education. I currently serve as the director of Multiple Pathways to Graduation for Portland Public Schools, but my testimony today is about my own experience and research and I am not here specifically to represent Portland Public Schools.

For more than 30 years, I have worked in education, as a community college GED and school district teacher, charter school director, alternative high school principal and central office administrator. I recently defended my doctoral dissertation in educational policy and leadership from Portland State University. My doctoral research focuses on how urban, rural, and suburban alternative schools in Oregon--specifically those that serve disproportionate numbers of historically underserved students--negotiate the state accountability system, in particular the school report cards in Oregon.

My research validated the published literature on alternative schools, that many students and staff in these schools often feel misunderstood, under-resourced, and stigmatized. The academic and social-emotional needs of alternative school students are often unknown to or misunderstood by the residents of their communities, as well as the professionals in their school districts. All of this points to the need for the task force proposed in House Bill 3236.

My research is also informed by the 2017 Oregon Secretary of State audit of our state's alternative schools and programs. That audit found that Oregon's use of the 4-year cohort graduation rate does not make sense when attached to alternative schools--many of which are designed to enroll transfer students who are off-track for graduation. Nationally, 75% of alternative schools do not meet the threshold of a 67% graduation rate, which is required in both the federal and state versions of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Given this, I would urge the task force to assess school effectiveness with a range of metrics and not just the four-year cohort graduation rate or standardized test scores. Without a more complete picture of student growth in alternative schools, we inadvertently may continue a system in which non-alternative high schools raise their graduation rates when struggling students transfer to alternative schools.

In closing, I urge the committee to support HB 3236. Alternative schools in Oregon play an essential role in educating students who would otherwise not finish high school, significantly impacting Oregon's goal of 100% high school graduation, as well as our state goal of 40/40/20. With disproportionate numbers of students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and those learning English as a second or third language populating our alternative high schools, this work is essential.

Thank you for your attention. I am happy to answer any questions you may have if there is time.