

February 11, 2021
House Judiciary Committee
RE: Support for HB 2942

Chair Bynum, Members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Denyse Peterson and I serve on the Board of Directors for Multnomah Education Service District (MESD). I'm writing today to express my support of HB 2942, which is the result of conversations that started within our Board's Equity and Inclusion Committee. While I am excited that you all are considering this legislation, I want to be clear that it is one piece in the bigger puzzle of curbing the school-to-prison pipeline. With that I want to take this opportunity to share my view on how this piece fits into our broader work.

A product of Portland Public Schools, I know first-hand that Oregon, like many other states, has historically pushed Black and brown kids out of the classroom via suspension and expulsion at a disproportionate rate. I recall my own suspension in high school regarding my eyes as a teacher thought I was rolling them -- an offense that barred me from school for an entire week during which time I not only missed direct instruction, but was not allowed to make up work. In my case, that single suspension did not do irreparable damage to my school career. But students who were suspended over and over were forced further behind in their academics, making it harder for them to succeed in school, which ultimately impacted their options after graduation -- if they stayed engaged that long (and it's hard to blame someone for walking away from a system that is constantly pushing them out).

When people don't have a lot of options - when they are desperate or in survival mode - they don't always make great choices. So it is not surprising that individuals may turn to crimes like prostitution or delivering drugs in order to make ends meet. And it is also not surprising that those individuals then find themselves in our prison system for those crimes, although I am not advocating for turning to such behavior.

This is what we mean by the school-to-prison pipeline. It is a process by which school disciplinary practices set students up for failure by pushing them out of our system, leaving them vulnerable to seeing poor choices as the only viable choices available to them.

Unfortunately, even after serving a sentence and supposedly paying one's dues to society, we continue to place barriers in front of the formerly-incarcerated as they try to get their lives back on track -- the adult equivalent of not allowing a suspended student to make up work they missed while out of class. And so, all too often, the cycle continues especially for Black and Brown individuals.

But we have an opportunity - and also a responsibility - to interrupt this cycle. Schools and community partners have done a lot of work in recent years to look at our approaches to discipline, with an aim of reducing racial disproportionality and excluding fewer students from our classrooms. However, we still have a long way to go. That's why MESD is working with our local juvenile justice system to better understand how district and school level policies may be inadvertently setting students on a path to be caught up in the justice system. I share this because I want you to know that we are doing the work of looking at our own practices and the role we play in this cycle.

HB 2942 is an extension of this work. We believe that individuals have the capacity to transform their lives. We see proof of this among the justice-involved youth we serve in county detention centers and OYA facilities. We also believe that one's past should not define them forever. So we are asking for the *opportunity* to consider hiring individuals who have non-violent, non-person crimes on their record. This doesn't lower hiring standards and it doesn't require a district to hire anyone they don't want to. But it at least allows those who have turned their lives around the chance to be considered.

As an individual, I believe this is the right thing to do from a justice perspective. I don't think we should continue to punish those with nonviolent criminal pasts forever. As a school board member, I also think that many of these individuals have valuable perspectives that students could benefit from.

I began my testimony by talking about the experience of youth who are pushed out of classrooms and into vulnerable situations. One aspect of schools' responsibility in addressing this cycle is to work proactively with students who may be exhibiting behaviors that could lead to disciplinary action. These are the students we refer to in policy terms as "at-risk."

Ideally, this type of proactive engagement should be happening way before something like suspension ever comes up. It can happen via official avenues like a school counselor, via conversation with a caring teacher and also through interaction with many of our other support staff who build relationships with students, such as instructional assistants and bus drivers. I think it can be most impactful when it is grounded in authentic connection and based in the reality of our students lives.

By that, I mean: envision a conversation between an "at-risk" student and a caring adult who has personal experience with the justice system, who can speak to their lived experience of how much harder their early choices have made their life. This creates a space for students to feel understood and seen with regard to the choices they feel like they have and why they might be making the choices they are. And it allows them to hear directly from someone with real life experience how those choices could impact their futures.

The discipline practices I described in the opening of my testimony are not in our distant past. The students who grew up at the height of such exclusionary discipline practices are now adults in our communities. I see these individuals as potentially powerful components of our youth engagement work. By barring anyone with one of the listed non-violent, non-person crimes from employment in our schools we are unnecessarily limiting the number of staff that might best be able to keep our most “at-risk” students engaged and committed to graduating.

I therefore ask you today to join us curbing the school-to-prison pipeline by supporting HB 2942.

Thank you.