

HB 2942 Testimony from Helen Ying

February 11, 2021

Chair Bynum and Committee Members,

My name is Helen Ying. I've been an educator for over 30 years and currently serve on the Multnomah Education Service District Board. I chair the Board Equity and Inclusion Committee. As we began to implement the Education Equity Policy that was adopted in 2018, one of the steps was to review board policies with the Equity Lens. We decided to commence with the Criminal Background Checks and Fingerprinting Policy. That discussion began in April 2019. We invited staff from the Alano Club of Portland and the Metropolitan Public Defender to help inform our work. I still remember vividly the words of the lawyer informing us that a lot of these crimes are being prosecuted in a culturally disproportionate manner. While there is a large effort to try and make them expungeable, only 3% of people who are convicted go through the expungement process.

He further shared with us the prevalence of drug dealing and prostitution as the only available economic pathway for a lot of parents who are in their forties, and fifties. The limitation of access to employment continues to perpetuate the cycle of criminal involvement. It seems to illustrate a systemic issue.

MESD believes in restorative justice and the ability of individuals to transform their lives. We provide education for more than 2,000 justice-impacted youth in detention and correctional facilities. On a daily basis, we work with justice-impacted youth who may have committed crimes because they are experiencing addiction themselves or are seeking a path out of poverty. The consequences of their actions are long-lasting. After serving time and paying fines, youth's family, friends and community often shun them. They also experience housing barriers, lack of access to jobs, fear, and ongoing stigma.

We believe that people who have been convicted of nonviolent crimes, and who have paid for those crimes, should not be kept from providing for their families. If they are the most qualified candidates for our jobs, their past actions should not keep them from positively contributing to our district and our community.

HB 2942 will allow school districts to employ individuals with prior nonviolent criminal offenses. It will allow the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission and local districts to evaluate individuals for employment on a case-by-case basis, rather than automatically barring anyone with these crimes in their past. This approach serves the dual purpose of maintaining child safety standards while also acknowledging the ability of individuals to transform themselves and their community.

Our goal is to create a path for folks who could benefit a certain group of youth to be able to work in our schools. In order for us to break the school to prison pipeline, we need to have people who can relate to them and serve as role models to help these youth break the cycle of criminal involvement and find a better path forward.

I hope that you will join me in supporting this bill, reducing barriers to employment for adults and creating new opportunities for keeping our at-risk students engaged.