



February 8, 2023

TO: House Committee on Education  
FROM: Our Children Oregon, The Children's Agenda  
RE: Support for HB 2656, Elevate Student Voice Act

Dear Chair Neron, Vice-Chair Hudson, Vice-Chair Wright, and Members of the Committee

Our Children Oregon (OCO) is a statewide organization that advances equitable policies, data and research, and whole-child advocacy. The Children's Agenda, convened by OCO, brings together ~127 organizations statewide to create a holistic legislative agenda dedicated to improving the well-being of Oregon's children, youth, and families. Our collective created a 2023 legislative agenda that focuses on community-driven solutions to provide access and opportunities for all children and families.

We know that children and youth in Oregon and across the country are in the midst of a mental health crisis. In Oregon, 11.5% of children between the ages of 3 to 17 reported having anxiety or depression in 2016. That jumped to 16.1% in 2020, an increase of 40% over 4 years.<sup>1</sup> But the true picture of this data, the reality of it, is more clearly captured when we engage students directly and hear their experiences. According to Oregon's 2020 Student Health Survey, 14.5% of 8th graders surveyed had an unmet emotional or mental health need, and 16.7% of 6th graders did not feel connected nor feel a sense of belonging in school.<sup>2</sup>

We strongly support HB 2656 because the Student Educational Equity Survey (SEED) and the Student Health Survey (SHS) both help to bring the voices of students to the forefront. These surveys help us clearly understand students' experiences, students' mental health needs, and ways to improve learning conditions in schools. They ask about whether students have tools to connect them with teachers, whether they have access to a full-rounded education, and if students have a trusted adult either in or outside of school. These are critical questions to highlight students' experiences and connect their voices to what is and is not working in our schools.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aecf.org/resources/2022-kids-count-data-book>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ourchildrenoregon.org/publications/oregon-kids-count/>

HB 2656 can be a start to better data collection statewide. Currently, about 65 out of the 197 Oregon school districts participate in the SEED and SHS surveys, approximately a 32% participation rate. With HB 2656, Oregon can ensure that critical data is collected from all areas of Oregon, and thus, used by the state and ODE to target resources and support where they are most needed. With more participation from school districts, Oregon can ensure that students' voices, especially those from the most vulnerable student populations, are being heard and represented.

We thank you for your time and efforts to improve child well-being across the state, and we urge you to support HB 2656.

From the Our Children Oregon Team,

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*View the 2023 Children's Agenda at [www.ourchildrenoregon.org/2023-childrens-agenda](http://www.ourchildrenoregon.org/2023-childrens-agenda)*