

Date: February 8th, 2022  
To: House Committee on Education  
From: Ronnie Strode, Policy Analyst for the Urban League of Portland  
Re: Support for Improvements in Student Success, HB 2656

Chair Neron, Vice-Chairs Hudson and Wright, Members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 2656. My name is Ronnie Strode and I am a Policy Analyst with the Urban League of Portland. The Urban League of Portland is one of Oregon's oldest civil rights and social service organizations, empowering African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security, and quality of life across Oregon and Southwest Washington.

Passing this bill is crucial in addressing the disparities that exist in our education system. For reference, due to a culture of excessive monitoring and discipline against Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) youth, over twelve percent of Black students and Indigenous students were suspended or expelled during the 2018-2019 school year.<sup>1</sup> Comparatively, only six percent of white students were met with this level of discipline. Moreover, Black students accounted for 46.1% of all the major discipline incidents reported, including expulsions and out-of-school suspensions in PPS middle schools, while white students made up 5.2%. Disciplinary actions can have a ripple effect on other aspects of students' lives, such as their likelihood of dropping out of school, or worse. Statistics bear that out: the high school dropout rate for Black students between 2017 and 2018 was 5.9%, but only 3.3% for white students."<sup>2</sup> Because Black youth are being punished at disproportionately higher rates, this leads to lower graduation rates and an increased exposure to the juvenile justice system, which can have a lasting detrimental impact on the future success of these students.<sup>3</sup> Black youth are at risk of negative interactions and criminalization at schools.

To date, there are nearly 13,000 Black students in Oregon who lack an opportunity to share their experiences with the education system in the state.<sup>4</sup> By requiring school districts to participate in surveys and convening an advisory committee, we will have a better understanding of the school environment and the experiences of students. This data will inform our efforts to create policies and practices that support all students, especially those who have been historically underrepresented or underserved. If we maintain the status quo, we will only continue to forgo the wealth of knowledge available from our youth, which will further exacerbate the aforementioned racial disparities and racist outcomes in our education system.

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<sup>1</sup> Willamette Week, Oregon's Black and Indigenous Kids Are Disciplined at Twice the Rate of Their White Classmates, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Willamette Week, Oregon's Black and Indigenous Kids Are Disciplined at Twice the Rate of Their White Classmates, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> American Psychological Association, "For Black students, unfairly harsh discipline can lead to lower grades," 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Oregon Department of Education, "Oregon Statewide Report Card, 2021-2022."

Involving youth, particularly those from historical underrepresented communities, in the policy-making process is critical in addressing the root causes of these disparities. This bill will empower youth to have a voice in shaping their own future and the future of their communities. By supporting diverse youth leaders, we can ensure that the policies and practices that impact their lives are developed with their perspectives and experiences in mind.

Please pass HB 2656 to bring meaningful change, create an equitable education system, and give power to Black youth voices. Schools should be a safe place to learn, socialize, and grow. We will not have an education system that works for everyone until everyone's voice is included.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ronnie D Strode III". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large "R" and "S".

Ronnie D. Strode III  
Policy Analyst  
Urban League of Portland  
Portland, OR 97227  
Phone: 503.280.2600  
Fax: 503.281.2612