

Dear Chair Dembrow and members of the Committee:

My name is Tami Darden, and I am a resident of Eugene and an educator. I work for a non-profit organization that coordinates educational and action opportunities related to environmental and climate action and justice. Over the last decade in my profession, I have engaged with dozens of schools and teachers across the state, and thousands of students. I am writing today to urge you to support SB-421, which would provide a platform for equal representation of historically under-represented groups throughout our state. Importantly, this bill stresses the importance of hearing student voices, on the issues that directly affect their lives and their experience as citizens of this state.

During my interactions with students over the years, I have seen their frustration at not being taken seriously with their often very insightful and creative ideas. This can easily lead to a sense of apathy and disconnect from engaging in our democracy—which can then lead to apathetic and disengaged adults. This trend is especially apparent within communities who, for many decades, were never given a seat at the table for issues and decisions that very much directly affected them, often in a negative way. I don't need to summarize the myriad ways this has occurred; you are all aware of historical injustices that we are still working to rectify within our state.

To me, this bill represents one of the ways we help correct some of those historical injustices—by ensuring, through law, that underrepresented youth voices are valued and heard--and that their opinions are taken into account in the lawmaking process. The fact that the bill requires representation from all educational school districts in Oregon, and creates a framework for a broad-based, comprehensive, and diverse student body committee encourages democratic engagement and teaches students that Oregonians need to work together for equity and justice in all communities across Oregon.

I truly hope you can see the positive potential of this bill in teaching our future leaders about the value of equal representation and active engagement in our democracy, and the model it can become for other states to begin integrating more equity-based student involvement into their legislatures. Thank you for taking the time to consider my testimony, and for thinking deeply about the positive impacts that passage of this bill could bring.

Respectfully,

Tami Darden
Eugene, OR