

Date: February 28, 2023

To: Senate Committee on Rules

RE: Support SB 612 and SB 911

Chair Lieber, Vice-Chair Knopp, and members of the committee,

My name is Beth Ronk, and I am an English Language educator and community organizer. I serve on the Board of Directors of Oregon Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ORTESOL), and I am a lead organizer with Immigrant Mutual Aid Coalition (IMAC). I have been an educator for 22 years.

In my professional roles, I have taught and worked alongside hundreds of Oregonians who speak an Indigenous language as their first language. In the professional ESOL community, multilingual education and access to first-language materials and support are widely accepted as best practices. Whether students are children or adults, educators agree that people thrive in communities that nurture both home language(s) and English. This is why public schools provide communication and materials in students' home language whenever possible and why dual-immersion and bilingual programs are the gold standard in language education. Language is an essential part of culture; if language needs are not be met, we are giving the message that a student's culture isn't valued.

However, I have also experienced the difficulty of finding interpretation for students' families who speak an Indigenous language. I've had countless conversations about how Spanish interpretation isn't an acceptable substitute for an Indigenous language in all situations, as many families do not speak Spanish, much less read or write it. At our school, we always found some way to communicate with families in their home language, but it would sometimes take more than a day and several phone calls to find the right person to interpret.

In a school, we have the luxury of waiting for an interpreter in most cases. But in a medical or legal situation, waiting hours or days can mean life or death. Everyone has the right to receive information in their home language, especially in an emergency. Put simply, language access is a matter of public safety and dignity.

In my experience accompanying people to court appointments, I have seen cases be postponed because there is no interpreter available. I have also heard the frustration of colleagues who are Indigenous language interpreters be called on to interpret and then receive little or no pay because they are not credentialed (nor can be).

One of the strengths of SB 612 and SB 911 is that they were crafted alongside Indigenous language speakers and interpreters. Each bill thoughtfully addresses the needs of the communities and provides solutions. SB 911 will establish a commission for Original Peoples from South America, Central America, and Mexico within the Oregon Advocacy Commissions

Office, ensuring that the voices of Indigenous communities are represented in state government and have a direct voice in policy proposals that concern Indigenous Oregonians.

SB 612 will result in the development of language proficiency evaluation mechanisms for Indigenous languages, allowing interpreters to demonstrate their language skills and obtain formal credentialing. The bill will also allow Indigenous interpreters to be paid a living wage and prevent Indigenous Oregonians from being forced to pay for their own interpretation through a potentially unreliable or unqualified interpreter.

Over 35,000 Oregonians speak an Indigenous language as their primary language, but the current lack of Indigenous interpretation services too often leads to Indigenous Oregonians being denied life-saving care due to language barriers, an inability to access critical services, or imprisonment and deportation.

I urge your support of these important bills!

Sincerely,

Beth Ronk, MEd.