



Testimony to: **Senate Committee on Judiciary**
From: **Debbie Simons, Chief Human Resources Officer**
Date: **March 2, 2023**
Subject: **Support for SB 524**

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on SB 524. On behalf of the Northwest Regional ESD, I would like to express support for SB 524. Prior to starting at NW Regional ESD in the Fall of 2021, I spent the majority of my career in Southern Oregon, first as a teacher, then a building principal, and most recently having served as Assistant Superintendent of the Medford School District.

I have worked in and overseen Human Resources for school districts since 2004; and have served as a board member and past president for the Oregon School Personnel Association for more than eight years. In my role, I have reviewed hundreds of background checks for both staff and adult volunteers in schools, and have worked with adults who have been convicted of felonies that prevent them from either working or volunteering in schools. I believe that people can be deserving of second chances, but my first priority will always be the safety of students.

In 2021, I opposed efforts to modify the disqualifying crimes list used in K-12 hiring. That proposal would have removed manufacture and delivery convictions and prostitution from the list, with proponents sharing their desire for school district HR professionals to have greater discretion in their hiring decisions. I met with the proponents and explained to them that the sort of case-by-case discretion they were seeking isn't possible under our current system due to the lack of information districts receive through the state's background check process. If that bill had passed as written, anyone with those prior convictions would be given a green light to work in our schools. That was not a standard I could support.

The proposal before you today is different. SB 524 comes with a recognition that our existing K-12 hiring standards and background check processes are more complex than one might assume. It also takes into account the fact that the disqualifying crimes list plays a role in the authority of the Teacher Standards and Practices Commissions' to sanction current license holders. The bill doesn't make any changes to our current standards. Rather, it simply calls for a review of our candidate vetting and background check standards and processes.

I think the makeup and structure of the proposed advisory council is very important. As someone who has spent their career in education, I know schools and I know students and families, but I am not an expert in public safety. I believe that bringing these two perspectives together to talk about what is necessary to keep children safe makes a lot of sense. Moreover, I take some comfort in the fact that, with the Criminal Justice Council as the convener, we are assured that any review is grounded in public safety data, not simply a philosophical belief in second chances.

In education, we often operate under the principle of continuous improvement, where we are constantly looking at our data, reviewing our practices, and then making adjustments to our work to better serve students. So, I have no opposition to reviewing our hiring standards for K-12 employees. I even think this process might be helpful in illuminating some areas where we could put in place stronger protections for student safety. I also think it is worth noting that any discussion about those sorts of policy improvements would still come back to the Legislature. Under SB 524, you all remain the ones with authority over our hiring and background check standards.

I think that any time we are talking about student safety, we need to keep the bar high. I have opposed previous efforts to modify our hiring standards in K-12. But I can comfortably say that I support SB 524 and the collaborative, data-based discussion it calls for.