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March 8, 2023

Chair Courtney Neron
Vice-Chair Zach Hudson
Vice-Chair Boomer Wright
Members of the House Education Committee

RE: HB 3288 – Standardize How Oregon Schools Collect Student Race and Ethnicity Data

Dear Chair Neron, Vice-Chair Hudson, Vice-Chair Wright, and members of the House Education Committee,

On behalf of Foundations for a Better Oregon, I write today to express support for HB 3288. FBO is a project of Oregon’s five largest foundations, bridging between community, policymakers, and philanthropy to ensure our state supports every child to learn, grow, and thrive.

Oregon public schools are required to collect student demographic information using a two-part format with certain category options. That data is housed in district student information systems, transferred into common state reporting templates, and then aggregated in ways that we are all familiar with, comparing subgroup outcomes like early literacy and graduation rates. Collecting this data meets federal reporting requirements, and it is also critical for decision-makers like yourselves to see and address patterns of inequity.

Yet there are inherent problems in the way Oregon collects information about students’ race, ethnicity, and home language.

First, the state leaves it up to the discretion of 197 districts how a family is asked to self-identify or how districts determine “observed identity” when not provided by the family. And as any data nerd—or mother of a teenager—will tell you, how you ask the question shapes the responses you receive.

Second, the way federal categories are defined and coded invisibilizes certain identities and masks critical inequities across and especially within student groups. To put it plainly, many students don’t see themselves in the data, and the data doesn’t see them.

Yet these federal categories are the floor not the ceiling. Federal guidance actually encourages the collection of more granular demographics that can be “rolled up” to the required categories. We already have bright spots of this happening in Oregon.

A decade ago, the Oregon legislature passed HB 2134, which required DHS and OHA to develop standards to collect more consistent and more granular data on race, ethnicity, language and disability. Today, the REAL-D standards help our state’s public health and social service systems to meet federal reporting requirements, more accurately describe Oregon’s diverse populations, and better allocate resources to address health and social inequities.



In 2021, Corvallis School District convened an inclusive work group to improve how race and ethnicity data is collected locally. When the district embedded new racial sub-categories in its student information system, they saw a three-fold increase in students identifying as Black/African American, five fold increase in students identifying as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and a twelve fold increase in students identifying as Alaska Native/American Indian.

As a Corvallis community member myself, I know this data is finally reflecting the rich diversity of our youth and families.

The technical capacity and resources necessary to undertake what Corvallis and others have done is simply not possible for many of Oregon's smaller districts. Meanwhile many small, rural districts are actually far more racially diverse than Oregon's population as a whole. New statewide data standards will deliver a powerful tool to inform local decision making to meet unique local needs.

House Bill 3288 will engage local districts in an inclusive process, alongside students, families, community leaders, and data justice experts. This advisory group will oversee the development of the data standards and an implementation plan that identifies the timeline, funding, technology, training, and community outreach needed to do this work well by the start of the 2026-2027 school year. This thoughtful and phased approach considers lessons learned from other states and the development of REAL-D standards.

House Bill 3288 will support efforts across our state to build a more equitable education system—one that recognizes our students' diverse identities, unique gifts, and their inherent dignity.

Sincerely,

Sarah Lench
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