



A STRONG VOICE FOR OREGON'S WORKERS

To: Chair Dembrow
Vice-Chair Weber
Members of the Senate Education Committee
FR: Catie Theisen, Oregon AFL-CIO
RE: Support for SB 489, UI Access for School Employees

March 16, 2023

The Oregon AFL-CIO represents 300,000 workers across Oregon and is a voice for all workers in the legislative process. We strongly support SB 489 and the right for all workers to equitably access unemployment benefits when they're out of work. This bill simply makes sure that some of the lowest paid education workers do not face *additional barriers* to accessing unemployment benefits, on top of what every other Oregon worker faces.

SB 489 finishes the job that the Legislature has already begun to exempt classified education workers from the confusing and unfair UI "reasonable assurance test." The legislature already addressed this issue for janitorial workers in schools in 2019 and for those providing school food services, early intervention and prekindergarten services in 2021. SB 489 would make sure these protections apply to all classified education employers and eliminate the extra complexity and burden of the test on Employment Department employees.

UI benefits are simply not full wage replacement but a means to get by when a worker is out of work. And despite the fact that classified education jobs include weeks where employees do not receive a paycheck, they keep coming back to provide the critical services to students. We know that schools would simply cease to operate if it wasn't for school bus drivers, special education assistants, janitors and food service workers just to name a few.

If these workers can't be treated as permanent employees, they at least deserve some means to survive in the weeks where school is not in session. This is not only good for the worker, but also for the economy and community at large, and ultimately helps ensure that these employees come back to work year after year, instead of having to rehire with new, untrained, and less experienced workers.

For too long, underfunded public school districts have leaned on the reasonable assurance test to not pay for UI benefits for school employees during breaks. And workers who will be helped by this bill are not only overwhelmingly women and people of color – they are those who often already must work additional jobs to survive. Denying unemployment benefits to them because they're working for an educational institution is to push workers already on the margin even farther to the side.

The return on investment for our schools and communities with SB 489 is clear and will mean that the lowest wage workers aren't left holding the bag when schools are underfunded. We encourage your support of SB 489 to protect unemployment access for some of Oregon's most essential workers.