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REGIONAL OFFICES

Baker, Crook,
Deschutes, Gilliam,
Grant, Harney, Hood
River, Jefferson, Morrow,
Umatilla, Wallowa &
Wasco
541-797-7726

Benton, Lane, & Linn
541-600-8035

Children's Book Bank at
SMART Reading
(warehouse)
503-616-3981

Clackamas, Multnomah,
& Washington
971-634-1628

Clatsop, Columbia,
Lincoln, Marion, Polk,
Tillamook, & Yamhill
503-391-8423

Coos & Curry
541-266-7476

Douglas
541-672-6477

Jackson & Josephine
541-734-5628

Klamath & Lake
541-273-2424

March 29, 2023

Courtney Neron, Chair
House Committee on Education
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Chair Neron, Vice-Chairs Hudson and Wright, & Members of the Committee:

Thank you for your work and careful consideration of legislation that will improve early literacy across Oregon. The pandemic caused significant and irreversible interruptions in learning for our state's youngest readers, and ensuring that we're putting our students back on a path to literacy and learning success is more important than ever. As a community-based organization that's been providing reading support for Oregon kids for over 30 years, SMART Reading is poised to support our state in this critical endeavor.

I know we all agree that reading is the gateway to learning and opportunity for Oregon's kids. Without it, they are less likely to graduate high school, find employment, or successfully avoid other hardships like poverty, homelessness, hunger, and other forms of injustice. Lower literacy rates don't just hurt individual children; they hurt us all. They impact the future health and prosperity of Oregon. They add strain on social and health services, impede our economic growth, and weaken our workforce.

Oregon's early literacy rates were unacceptable before the pandemic. Now, the situation is even more alarming with only 39 percent of Oregon third-graders reading at grade level. What's more, education gaps for students from historically marginalized communities have widened. House Bills 3198 and 3454 propose important and urgent action to improve early literacy rates and address this crisis in our state. Importantly, these merged bills recognize that successful early literacy strategies include both schools *and* communities.

Community-based organizations like SMART Reading supplement early childhood literacy in important, evidenced-based ways that improve outcomes for kids. SMART comes alongside Oregon's highest need schools and early learning providers to provide

two critical ingredients in literacy success: shared reading support and access to books. We accomplish our mission by mobilizing thousands of volunteers to serve over 15,000 young children in 32 counties and three Tribal nations across Oregon. Throughout our 31-year history, we've given students over 4 million high-quality, inclusive books to build their home libraries.

SMART has the statewide infrastructure and time-tested, research-based delivery models to support the state in improving our children's early literacy rates. We are hopeful that this bill moves forward and, as funding decisions are made, we encourage our legislators to remember that SMART and other community-based organizations are eager to bring our networks, resources and expertise to bear to ensure more Oregon kids are succeeding with reading.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jessica Bowersox". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jessica" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Bowersox".

Jessica Bowersox
Executive Director
SMART Reading



Who We Are

SMART Reading is a children's literacy nonprofit that serves kids in Oregon's highest need schools with two ingredients critical for literacy and learning success: shared reading time and access to books.

What We Do

Research proves that shared book reading and availability of books in the home are the strongest predictors of early literacy skills. SMART delivers both by pairing trained adult volunteers with Oregon school children for one-on-one and classroom reading sessions and providing books to keep. **The support SMART provides is more important than ever.**

As SMART has grown to serve children in 300 sites in 31 of Oregon's 36 counties and three tribal nations, the organization has remained committed to reaching those in greatest need of extra support. SMART's low-cost, evidence-based program is offered free to Oregon schools and early childhood centers. It builds kids' confidence, literacy skills and love of reading.

By leveraging public infrastructure and private dollars to improve reading outcomes, SMART Reading is a high-return investment in Oregon kids.

SMART Reading Facts



Founded in 1991



147,000+ Volunteers Engaged



266,000+ Children Served



4.5+ Million Hours of Shared Reading Time



\$134 Million in Donated Volunteer Hours



4+ Million Books Given



Serving 32 of Oregon's 36 counties & 3 tribal nations

Why it Works

Given the established importance of the third-grade reading benchmark in children's educational success, investing in early reading development is arguably the most cost effective strategy for positively impacting high school graduation rates.

SMART surveys educators and parents to gain insights about their experiences, which helps with continuous improvement. The feedback is overwhelmingly positive, revealing significant benefits for children participating in SMART Reading:

94%

94% of educators indicated SMART Reading contributed significantly to their students' reading motivation and enjoyment.

93%

93% of parents agreed that their children benefited significantly from SMART Reading, including demonstrating improved reading skills and spending more time reading.

Endorsements

- American Prize in Literacy from the U.S. Library of Congress.
- U.S. Department of Education's **What Works Clearinghouse** and the **Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy**
- **Program of Distinction** by Generations United