

April 3, 2023

To: House Committee on Education

From: Sara Kerr

RE: Support for HB 3198 and amendments

Good afternoon, Chair Neron, Vice Chairs Hudson and Wright, and Committee Members:

My name is Sara Kerr, and I am Northeast Portland resident, parent of two elementary aged children in Portland Public Schools, and the Vice President of Education Policy at Results for America, a national nonprofit focused on accelerating use of data and evidence by government leaders. I also have the privilege of serving on the board of directors for the Children's Institute.

That preamble on my background matters mainly because I think it's important that you know that I have spent the greater part of my professional and personal life deeply focused on what our public education systems need to look like in order to meet the needs of every single kid who enters our doors. I do this through a lens of data and evidence. At every turn, I ask myself and those around me: is what we are doing - or proposing to do - tied to observed and stated needs of those most proximate to our kids? Is it grounded in the best available data and research? Is it backed by evidence of prior impact on kids who look like those we are trying to serve? And is it, therefore, likely to make a difference for the kids who need it most?

It is with this lens that I offer my support for [HB3198](#), with four urgent caveats.

First, I want to underscore what we know based on brain science - literacy starts at birth. We have an opportunity in Oregon to address our literacy crisis in a comprehensive way, by making simultaneous, aligned investments in developmentally appropriate early learning and language development alongside investments in our K-12 education system. These coordinated investments would be a win for kids, families, and educators alike, providing a continuum of resources and support that can set our kids on a trajectory toward being skilled, enthusiastic, and empathetic readers, writers, and critical thinkers as they enter and move through early learning, preschool and elementary school settings.

Second, we have an opportunity - really a mandate - to do what it takes to get high-quality, evidence-based, culturally relevant literacy instruction and materials into classrooms in every corner of our state. Unlike many policy or practice questions where the evidence is less clear - or we just have less of it - when it comes to reading and writing, we *know* what works and must *invest* in what works. I'm concerned that the proposed grantmaking structure is too broad, both in terms of its ability to target and reach the neediest districts and students and in terms of allowable uses of funds.

- First, we can look to other states who have made similar literacy investments in recent years to inform our strategy for getting funds to districts. States that have distributed funds via grant programs without targeted funding for districts and schools that would most benefit from

additional resources and support are less likely to be successful in accelerating literacy growth for priority student groups. If we are serious about equity, we should consider a more targeted grant making approach, with absolute requirements for districts serving the highest populations of students below proficiency in reading in grades K-3.

- Second, Oregon needs not reinvent the wheel when it comes to selecting and vetting curriculum and instructional materials, and busy Oregon districts do not need to spend time doing their own research and independently researching and vetting options. Rather than direct ODE to develop a rubric to support curricular decisions, Oregon should develop a pre-approved list that districts can - but are not required to - choose from. Leveraging principles of behavioral science and “nudge theory” ODE can design the grant to make it easier for districts to select a pre-approved evidence-based curriculum, requiring those who choose to select from outside that list to provide a detailed, data-based rationale in their applications. There are myriad benefits to this approach, including the opportunity for districts that select the same curriculum to form collaborative communities of practice as they train teachers, implement, and measure the impact of their approaches. Notably, this approach would not minimize the importance of local need and context since districts would be *encouraged* but not *required* to select a pre-approved curricula. What it *would* do is center kids and ensure that we don’t leave to chance their access to the teaching and learning we know they need.

Third, the investments we make in adopting new, high-quality, culturally relevant core and supplemental curriculum and instructional materials are crucial but alone insufficient. They *must* be coupled with deep investments in professional development and coaching for educators in every district, rooted - like the curricula themselves - in the science of reading. These supports need to be made available to current educators as well as those *preparing* to become teachers. Educator preparation programs are key partners in this work, and if we are not planting seeds now that can bear fruit later by ensuring our rising educator workforce is being taught according to the science of reading, we simply cannot expect to see deep and widespread impact. This is not something that will happen overnight - which means that these *longer-term* investments in professional learning, coaching, and reforming educator preparation programs must be coupled with *immediate* investments in tutoring and summer learning - dollar for dollar some of the most impactful investments we could be making.

Fourth, there *must* be accountability for this investment - and mechanisms in place, from the start, for us to be able to ask and answer deceptively simple questions like: *What are we trying to do? How are we planning to do it? At any given moment, are we on track? And if we are off track, what are we going to do about it?* In other words, we need a *learning agenda* and *learning system* for our literacy investment that will let us know - as we implement, not five or 10 years from now - if the funds are being spent wisely, reaching the right kids, and making the impact we intend. There are a few concrete ways to do this:

- Set aside 1 percent of the investment for program evaluation. And commit to using the results as a flashlight - not hammer - to strengthen the literacy investments and share best practices across the state;

- In addition to forming a Literacy Task Force, increase transparency and public engagement by requiring ODE to produce a public-facing series of reports detailing both implementation progress and impact; and
- Require that districts also invest in comprehensive, high-quality, evidence-based assessments starting early, looking at phonological awareness, concepts of print, phonics, problem solving behaviors, comprehension and oral language.

Reading is a civil right and we know that 95% of kids can learn to read if given the right support. Thank you for your commitment to kids, families, and educators, and to ensuring that we make deep and sustained investments - rooted in the best possible data and evidence - in the future of every learner in Oregon.

With regards,

Sara Kerr

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