

April 14, 2023

Joint Committee on Ways and Means
Sen. Elizabeth Steiner
Rep. Tawna Sanchez, Co-Chair

Co-Chairs Steiner and Sanchez and Honorable Committee Members:

My name is Misty Talerico and I am a member of Oregon School Employees Association (OSEA). I have worked eight years in special education as a special education assistant providing special care to high need students on individual education plans. This 2022/2023 school year, I left special education to become the assistant of the virtual academy where I assist two principals, four advisory teachers, and approximately one hundred students from k-12.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of key investments to build a better Oregon with higher quality student-centered educational experiences for all students, workers and working families.

OSEA represents about 23,000 workers in nearly all levels of public education, including Head Start programs, K-12 school districts, ESDs, community colleges and special districts. OSEA members perform many of the essential tasks that keep Oregon public schools safe and functional for students, administrators, and teachers. Classified employees are the most diverse sector of public education, so we most closely reflect our students. We have shared values and shared struggles.

In a typical elementary school day, the ratio of classified public education staff to licensed staff is roughly seven to one – from the bus driver that picks them up, to the principal’s secretary to the education assistants, the cafeteria workers, coaches, library and media specialists, interpreters to coaches, before- and after-school caregivers through the custodial and grounds staff who clean and reset the building for another day.

While we are very grateful to the Co-Chairs of Ways and Means for recommending a \$9.9 billion budget for K-12 in this economically challenging time, although the work the state directs us to do is assessed at \$10.3 billion. We need to do more for Oregon’s students, because they need more from us to support their social, emotional, behavioral, physical, and academic health – now more than ever before.

Every day, I am here to help my students. People accept and stay in classified jobs because we care about kids, and we not only want those individual students to be safe and successful, but for *Oregon* to be safe and successful. To make sure we’re on a successful path together, we need:

1. A \$10.3 billion appropriation for the State School Fund (SSF) this session, and
2. Meaningful investments in the education workforce – including:
 - Higher quality jobs that have Just Cause in the employment agreement,
 - Funding for recruitment and retention of classified employees to have five-hour minimum workdays or at least a 20% SPED differential,
 - Funding for the currently required de-escalation training and incident reports for classified staff who support special education students,
 - Funding for culturally appropriate early childhood literacy

Oregon students deserve a \$10.3 billion budget for the SSF. It is the essential, core funding for all our public-school districts. It funds the *essential* work of Oregon public education. It is the lifeblood that supports what classified employees are doing for Oregon students every day. We are the first to enter the building and the last to leave each night, to achieve our goal – Oregon’s goal – to support all of Oregon’s students.

Investing in public education must include investment in the educational workforce. We just don’t have enough people to do what needs to be done for the students. The people I work with are quitting left and right because we can’t afford to stay. We need to increase the quality of classified jobs to keep our skilled workforce AND recruit more to help.

In my rural school district alone, our employment page currently has fourteen classified job postings, and more are being added weekly. In rural coastal Oregon, there was a classified worker shortage before covid. Many of the classified jobs like mine barely make above minimum wage. In my new position, I track high school students’ work hours and enter their work experience credits on their transcripts. Many of these students working at fast food, grocery stores, gas stations, and other entry level jobs make more per hour than I and my fellow classified employees do. Those of us that stay with the kids are forced to get multiple jobs and/or rely on public assistance to make ends meet. For us, we stay because we love our jobs, and we care deeply about the students we support.

Education is a priority that requires consistent investments in addition to support for housing and behavioral health because these issues intersect and, if funded in concert, will mutually support Oregon’s students and their families. Combined with the additional investments by this committee in our education workforce, these core budget elements will help ensure that we can really lift Oregon’s students and families.

I know that this is a challenging time in Oregon’s history. But I stand with you to do the very best for all of Oregon’s students. My family has been on the north coast for generations, and I love my community. I support my neighbors, and they support me. Together, we support a lifetime of learning that will give all of Oregon a brighter future.

Thank you for your consideration and attention,

Misty Talerico
Bay City, Oregon

Cc. Sen. Lew Frederick, Subcommittee on Education, Co-chair
Cc. Rep. Susan McLain, Subcommittee on Education, Co-chair