

April 12, 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 Susan Hardy. I am a member of the Retired Oregon School Employees (ROSE). I Retired from my position as Family Advocate at Lane County Head Start and am a school board member in the Oakridge School district.

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 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, 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.

We have all heard and can tell the sad tales of the results to our students, our schools and our employees due to the pandemic, there were some funding benefits that made it feel like our heads were finally above water. After years of financial struggling, we were able to take care of things we had not been able to afford - such as building maintenance, education opportunities that benefitted our students and staff. Who would ever have thought that the federal funding, funding that must be spent or lost, spent on only specific things, would make us feel optimistic for the first time in recent memory. Deferred maintenance on our buildings, summer programs, the ability to establish a strong CT program, monetary rewards for staff. Oh, the blessed ESSER funds.

Oakridge is a very rural community with a population of just over 3200 and a total school district enrollment of just over 500. **100 percent of our students qualify for free lunches.** Housing is almost nonexistent. It is hard to attract staff who, too often, commute the 45 miles, one way, from the valley. And when they do commute from the valley, it communicates a temporary solution rather than a commitment to our little community. Kids need education professionals who stay and invest. Due to the pandemic, student enrollment is down from our pre-pandemic district enrollment of 557 students. These are all factors that have us barely keeping up with the cost of keeping up. It’s tough to keep our collective chins up.

Our employees are in the process of bargaining. How do we pay them what we know they need earn in a district atmosphere that is hanging on for survival?

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 education 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.

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. I have invested over 40 years in Oakridge’s education, and I am still doing my best to support and enhance educational opportunities – in my home, where I love my neighbors. I have loved and supported them when they were little, as they grew, as they had kids, as their kids grew, as they had their kids, and I am still fighting for a brighter future for all of us. Together, we support a lifetime of learning that will give all of Oregon a brighter future.

Thank you for your consideration and attention,

Susan Hardy  
Oakridge, Oregon

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