

May 2, 2023

To: Joint Committee on Ways and Means  
From: Bekah Sabzalian  
RE: Support HB 3198

Co-Chair Steiner, Co-chair Sanchez, and members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means,

My name is Bekah Sabzalian. I'm a licensed Oregon elementary teacher, literacy and dyslexia advocate, and until recently I was the education program officer at Meyer Memorial Trust. I write to you today through those experiences as well as an Apache and Mexican American mother of a child with dyslexia desperate for other children to receive more effective, more accessible, and more affordable literacy support than my young son has received. I believe, HB 3198, with necessary amendments, can create the early literacy system that Oregon's emerging readers need.

For far too long Oregon schools have been teaching literacy without the proper curriculum and instructional practices. And, I am concerned that when students don't achieve as expected, it is labeled as a student failure rather than a system failure with students of color and students with disabilities taking the brunt of the learning loss and negative labels. Personally, this was demonstrated by my son crying, "I'm stupid, I'm stupid!" through waterfalls of tears during his 2nd and 3rd grade years. These false and preventable negative beliefs and scars can last a lifetime and affect the whole family. Now, post-pandemic outcomes have become so dire that the problem is finally being identified correctly as a systemic failure, shifting the responsibility to state leaders like yourselves to create system-wide, equity-driven solutions.

Fortunately, HB 3189 offers solutions to these challenges. However, to ensure the benefits of this legislation reach every child in Oregon, the legislature must ensure accountability within every school district, ESD, and educator preparation program. This means:

- The state must ensure equity and differentiation guides resource allocation through HB 3198. Rather than a voluntary grant system, the state should target funding and technical assistance to the schools most in need of literacy support. The schools in districts with the most struggling readers need rapidly deployed, targeted funding to ensure their capacity to meet students' literacy needs as soon as possible. Differentiation is an essential educator skill necessary to teach diverse students effectively, and it should also be applied to education policy and funding.
- The state must ensure every school district adopts evidence-based curriculum and professional development programming supported by the science of reading and years of brain research.
- Teacher preparation programs must rapidly evolve to align with the science of reading and brain research. Oregon students deserve and are entitled to instruction from well-prepared teachers capable of teaching reading and writing effectively.

These amendments will ensure HB 3198, the Early Literacy Success Initiative, has the teeth necessary to support every young learner in Oregon. We cannot risk replicating the selectively effective, unjust programming we currently have. More resourced districts have already initiated science of reading aligned initiatives, which is fantastic for the students in those districts. But the state has a responsibility to ensure every Oregon student has access to these opportunities.

Oregon teachers and educators care deeply about student literacy outcomes. All educators know that literacy is foundational to all other academic learning. Teachers need the culturally affirming mindsets, beliefs, and instructional skills and resources necessary to help them care and conduct literacy instruction successfully.

HB 3198 has the potential to create a public education system capable of holding itself accountable to teaching our children to read and write well. However, amending the funding mechanism to target resources where they are most needed will ensure the bill's intended impact. I urge you, with necessary amendments, to fully fund HB 3198- the Early Literacy Success Initiative- and to continue supporting efforts that provide culturally affirming education environments through multiple curriculum improvements and a diverse education workforce. Oregon students deserve no less.