

Written Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 1596

Submitted by: Saumi Bonds, Educator and Parent

Date: February 5th, 2026

Chair, Vice-Chair, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Saumi Bonds, and I am submitting this testimony as an educator of thirteen years in strong support of Senate Bill 1596. I have spent twelve years as a classroom teacher from pre-kindergarten through 2nd grade, and now serve children and teachers as a TOSA. I have also taught in multiple school districts across two states, which has offered me a broader perspective on how systems shape children's learning.

Throughout my career, I've studied research-based instructional practices—effective reading strategies, approaches that best support mathematical thinking, and the systems we use to measure success. For many years, I felt pride in the work I did to "teach children." I use quotation marks here because, within the past four years, my understanding of what it means to teach—and what it means for children to truly learn—has transformed.

Children are inherently brilliant. They are natural scientists: curious, observant, continually forming hypotheses, conducting their own investigations, and constructing meaning about the world. Yet our current education system, shaped through an adult lens, often tells children—implicitly and explicitly—that they do not know much, and that adults will show them the "right way" to learn and do things. In the spirit of kindergarten readiness, even some preschool teachers are compelled to push aside the joy and natural curiosity of early childhood, replacing play with compliance and rigid routines.

Within my twelve years in classrooms, I watched children enter school and quickly come to define their identity through prevalent measures of success—reading levels, scores on math worksheets, and the pace at which they master isolated skills.

My perspective on education and my role as an educator completely shifted when I began my role as a kindergarten teacher at a school district that embraces playful learning here in Oregon. I saw children show up differently. They insisted on coming to school and arrived excited. They talked about their learning throughout the day and at home. What I witnessed wasn't just engagement—it was the profound difference between children learning to exist within a compliance based system, versus children learning how to co-exist in a harmonious community that nurtures connection, where they get to show up as whole humans with unique gifts.

As I learned about play and staying in inquiry as a teacher, I noticed how students use math skills while they play to engineer structures that could protect families from severe weather. I noticed them go in search of books to deepen their understanding. I watched them collaborate to figure out the information in a book on something they wanted to know more about, and how they wrote down what they learned to share with friends later. They were using text features—not because I assigned it, but because they needed the information to solve their problem. Previously, I had taught nonfiction text features from a textbook and assessed them by having students point out labels and diagrams so I could check a box. But in play, I saw children *authentically* use their knowledge and skills—talking about them, applying them, and learning from one another.

Play is rigorous—when adults know how to listen to children and understand their thinking. It is not simply singing songs or planning “cool” activities. To harness the brilliance of children through authentic play requires thoughtful facilitation: offering materials as thinking tools, posing open-ended questions, supporting inquiry, and being intentional about developing one’s own [Habits of Mind](#) as well as creating opportunities for students to learn about their own.

Senate Bill 1596 is essential because many adults still do not recognize play as rigorous learning. We have been conditioned to believe that play is “just for little kids,” and as a result, the brilliance children show during play is often dismissed as “cute” instead of understood as evidence of deep thinking.

When teachers learn to see the rigor in play, they get to witness extraordinary things: Two of my kindergarteners once found a toy figurine with a broken leg. Instead of putting it in the trash they decided to design a prosthetic for her, which led to a classwide inquiry into disability versus difference, and equity versus equality. As the class engaged in the study, the students began to notice inequities on our own playground. At this point, the students felt they needed to take action to make a change. They created plans, developed proposals, built prototypes, and presented them to our principal—This is a story of focused attention, communication, collaboration, strategic thinking, empathy, engineering, mathematical thinking, literacy, and civic engagement that all took place during their play.

So yes, play already exists in some classrooms across Oregon, but recognizing it as instructional time matters. **The passage of this bill would signal that lawmakers recognize the value of play and support teachers in creating space for authentic playful learning without fear. It would also create opportunities for professional development that helps educators study play as learning and develop practices for harnessing its rigor, just as we do with best practices in reading and math**

instruction. When educators become listeners, connectors, and facilitators, play can surface the interdisciplinary connections, and deeply human work education is meant to be.

For these reasons, I strongly support Senate Bill 1596.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

With Gratitude,
Saumi Bonds