

My name is Angela Vargas. I am a K–5 Early Learning Coach, and I have been an educator for 19 years. My work spans Head Start, K–5 Dual Language, and K–5 Primary Years Program settings, as well as coaching educators and facilitating professional learning connected to playful inquiry (Content Embedded Inquiry) in the Beaverton School District, the Oregon Education Association, and through deep learning alongside Teaching Preschool Partners..

I am writing in support of SB 1596 because one concrete way play-based learning benefits my work with children is that it makes children's thinking and learning dispositions—including literacy—visible in ways that traditional instruction often cannot. I have seen something again and again:

When we trust children's curiosity and give them room to learn through play, they show us brilliance we would never see through worksheets or compliance-based instruction. This bill—**SB 1596**—protects that brilliance.

In play-based, inquiry-driven classrooms, children demonstrate Habits of Mind that are foundational to learning: curiosity, persistence, flexibility, collaboration, and reflection. During sustained block play, I have watched emerging learners label their structures with signs, dictate stories about what they are building, and negotiate meaning through talk—developing early literacy skills rooted in purpose and audience. The students build on this work by drafting plans, revising written explanations, and using precise language to justify design decisions. Their work reveals not only mathematical and spatial reasoning and science habits and practices, but also perseverance, risk-taking, and an emerging belief that their ideas are worth communicating.

In dramatic play, children engage deeply in literacy practices across grade levels. Students use symbols, environmental print, and storytelling as they co-construct shared narratives about families, community spaces, or work roles. In upper elementary classrooms, I have seen students extend dramatic play into script writing, dialogue revision, and collaborative storytelling, using literacy to deepen character perspective and resolve conflict. Across ages, children adapt language for different roles and audiences, practice complex oral language, and negotiate meaning with peers—core literacy skills that emerge organically through play.

When children engage with open-ended materials such as loose parts, water, sand, or natural objects, literacy becomes a tool for inquiry. I have observed children from kindergarten through fifth grade generate questions, record observations, label diagrams, and revise hypotheses as they explore concepts like flow, erosion, and force. As the play becomes more complex, they draw and dictate their thinking, write reflections, create informational texts, or develop presentations to share their findings. What stands out most is their intellectual courage—the willingness to not know, to try anyway, and to use reading, writing, and oral language as tools for learning rather than tasks to complete.

Across these experiences, children consistently demonstrate agency and a strong sense of themselves as capable readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers. Play allows educators to witness children's literacy development in real time and respond by honoring their ideas, extending their language, and designing learning environments that build from children's strengths. Rather than reteaching or remediating in abstract ways, we can build instruction directly from what children show us they understand and are curious about. This is especially powerful for multilingual learners, children with disabilities, and children who may not yet demonstrate their knowledge through conventional academic tasks. Play becomes an equitable entry point where children's strengths lead the learning.

As a coach, that has support from the school board and executives, supporting 34 schools and over 700 teachers, I also see deep inconsistency in how playful inquiry is implemented across classrooms, if at all—not because educators don't value whole-child development, but because social and systemic pressures continue to position “academic learning” as separate from and more valuable than whole-child learning. This creates a false choice: either prioritize reading and math as isolated skills, or prioritize play, inquiry, and social-emotional development. Yet the examples in this testimony show this is a false choice. Playful inquiry does not replace academic learning—it reveals and strengthens it, making children's thinking visible in language, planning, collaboration, and problem-solving. Research on learning through play emphasizes that meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, joyful learning supports academic growth and engagement.

At the same time, Oregon's discipline data shows why children need approaches that support their whole development. Even though state rules say young children should only be suspended in the most serious situations, many K–5 students are still being removed from class. A study of 401 Oregon elementary schools found that removals went up after the 2015 policy change, and Black students were still twice as likely as other students to be removed from instruction. Another statewide study showed that while suspensions briefly went down after reforms, the numbers later crept back up, showing that rules aren't enough on their own. These removals go beyond official suspensions. Students can be pulled from class in many ways, and when things escalate, they may even experience restraint or seclusion. In 2023–24, Oregon recorded at least 4,439 restraint or seclusion incidents; 12% involved staff injuries and 2% involved student injuries.

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This is exactly where playful inquiry becomes both an academic and a social-emotional support—at the same time. When children's feelings and actions are treated only as challenges to manage, we lose opportunities to teach the skills children need to succeed: self-regulation, communication, collaboration, and agency. In contrast, play-based inquiry gives educators a structured way to observe children's needs, respond with skill, and teach those competencies in context—while also

making academic learning visible and rigorous. Teachers in our district describe this every day. They share that play creates space for “deep human interaction,” where children practice negotiating, building agreements, and repairing harm—skills that “alleviate issues in the classroom” over time. One teacher noted that when children were destroying one another’s work, playful inquiry made it clear the class needed to return to community agreements and Habits of Mind—nourishing the community rather than escalating consequences. Another teacher described learning to “let go of a sense of urgency,” slow down, and truly see all students—observing academic, social, and emotional strengths in real time and watching challenging behaviors decrease as students became “joyful, focused, and in flow.” A 5th grade teacher with a “diverse and challenging class” said she saw “some of the most engaged and focused learning moments” during Content Embedded (Playful) Inquiry inquiry—more than during reading or math—and that the noise was “productive,” rooted in collaboration rather than disruption. Across reflections, educators describe classrooms shifting from “I” to “we,” with students caring for each other, thinking more about the community, and stepping into leadership. They also describe how play opens space for identity, language, and equity work, conversations that “would not have come up with paper pencil alone.” In the words of one teacher: “Play is where we learn all the skills of how to live well together. It is what makes us human.”

SB 1596 supports the conditions that allow complex learning to be possible. It moves us toward classrooms where academic learning and whole-child development are not forced as separate—but welcomed to be deeply connected.

For these reasons, I strongly urge your support for SB 1596

Sincerely,

Angela Vargas
K-5 Early Learning Coach/TOSA