

JOINT HEARING – SENATE and HOUSE COMMITTEES ON VETERANS AND
EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS
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Testimony by Edward Wolf, Portland
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Chairman Boquist, Chairman Matthews, and members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of the findings and recommendations of the *Oregon Resilience Plan*.

For the record, my name is Edward Wolf of 3414 NE 18th Avenue, Portland 97212. I am a writer and served as a community member of the Portland Public Schools Long Range Facilities Plan advisory committee, as well as a citizen member of the advisory panel of the *Oregon Resilience Plan*. Along with fellow Portland parent Amanda Gersh, I co-founded a statewide parents' initiative called Oregon Parents for Quake Resistant Schools.

Resilience to a region-wide earthquake and tsunami begins by taking action to protect lives and to support self-sustaining economic recovery from disaster. In Oregon, two places face the highest risk of mass casualties in a subduction zone earthquake: the tsunami inundation zone along our coast, and Oregon's 1,296 K-12 public schools. The vast majority of the latter high-occupancy public buildings were built before state building codes incorporated seismic provisions. Old, brittle buildings pose hazards to hundreds of thousands of Oregon schoolchildren.

Our schools should not be in the running to be Oregon's most dangerous place. They do not have to be.

The state's capacity to advance the seismic resilience of Oregon schools is limited, but not trivial. The Seismic Rehabilitation Grant Program, a small but innovative program established by the Legislature and currently administered by Oregon Emergency Management, is the chief tool available. In the four years since this program was established, grants have been awarded to two school districts with local capital bonds in place – where retrofits could be integrated with other facilities work – and to thirteen school districts with no other capital funding dedicated to earthquake safety. A total of twenty-two K-12 public schools have received grants for these safety improvements so far.

Given the urgency and scope of the problem, it's worth asking how state funding can play a part in attracting more local funding to address the seismic need.

After the narrow defeat of a school construction bond in May 2011, Portland Public Schools sought and received a state seismic retrofit grant for Alameda Elementary School, the district's highest-enrollment grade school. The state grant validated the district's decision to emphasize earthquake safety. The district heard from families and community members that they, too, valued seismic safety. In November 2012, a new \$482 million bond, with a central focus on seismic improvements, won by a two-to-one margin.

The state grant to retrofit Alameda School, funded last July, gave the Portland district the means to pay for capital planning at the same time voters were considering the new local bond. While planning the Alameda project, the district

was able to initiate preparations for related projects at four other schools. Once voters endorsed the school bond in November, funds were put to work immediately on these projects. The state seismic grant primed that pump, with direct benefits to taxpayers, employment, and children.

The timing in Portland's case was a happy coincidence, but there is no reason this kind of synergy must be left to chance. Since its inception in 2009, the state grant program has funded retrofit projects in districts from Lakeview to North Clackamas. That's a good start on the roughly 1,000 school facilities believed to be candidates for seismic repairs. Growing this successful program deserves to be a centerpiece of resilience efforts. Aligning the program with local districts' capital bond plans promises to accomplish more, faster.

Let me be clear: the state grant did not initiate concern for earthquake safety in the Portland district, but it did help to focus the bond proposal and to draw public attention to the priority. In this case, every dollar of the state investment helped to leverage \$321 in local investment– an attractive ratio.

Resilience will require sustained investment. State and local initiatives must proceed hand in hand. The Portland story shows one way that state resources can leverage local support to reduce the risks faced by children in our schools.

The *Oregon Resilience Plan* calls on you to find, and to capitalize on, similar opportunities for leverage in the state-local partnership. Thank you.