

Senate Committee on Education  
Legislative Testimony re: SB 180  
02.06.19

Chair Wagner, Vice Chair Thomsen and members of the Committee on Education, I am Dr. Sue Rieke-Smith, Superintendent of Tigard Tualatin School District 23J. I speak to you today regarding the life changing impact Senate Bill 180 would have affected in my previous district, via my work with Director Wise during my tenure as superintendent of Springfield Public Schools in Springfield, Oregon. Springfield is a small “can do” community with a long and proud history rooted in the timber industry. With the change in federal forest policy came mill closures and loss of a livable wage lifestyle. Poverty, addiction and mental illness took the place where there was once a strong middle-class community. During my tenure in Springfield, 42% of families lived at or below the federal poverty limit. 7 in 10 students qualify for free and reduced meal support. As a result, mental health services and social emotional learning programming was a constant priority for Springfield teachers and instructional staff. Through programmatic reprioritization and additional funding from the state during the 2015-17 biennium, we carved out \$500,000 to begin to address the mental health needs for our schools.

As superintendent, as well as a former public health nurse, I knew the district needed to provide a strategic system of mental health supports that could weather state school funding cycles. Effective, cost efficient and thus sustainable community partnerships were critical to the success of a such a system. Springfield Public Schools entered into pilot relationships with various community health care partners. Ophelia’s Place was one such pilot providing bullying prevention and youth empowerment programming to one of four district middle schools. It

was clear early on that students who participated in the empowerment groups demonstrated better problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, an increase in positive interactions with other students, staff and family members as well as greater resiliency in navigating the joys and challenges that developing pre-pubescent children face. I note the following statistics gathered from post surveys given to those middle school students who participated in Ophelia's Place programming:

- 92% of students state they are more confident in developing, engaging in and navigating healthy relationships with others.
- 78% of students state they see peers as allies
- 76% of students state they are able to more confidently identify and navigate sexual harassment
- 75% of students state they are more confident in handling internet safety, which includes cyber bullying. A slide in the presentation on internet safety notes that a student is 7 times more likely to be cyberbullied by a friend than a stranger. Following the presentation, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader noted, "...but if they cyberbully, they aren't your friend."

Based on the pilot's outcomes, I directed staff to scale up and expand the partnership to all four middle schools as part of the district's K-12 mental health wrap around services system. Today, each middle school receives:

- 40 classroom presentations to both boys and girls
- Three girl empowerment groups
- Six hours of staff and parent training
- Eight hours of group facilitation training

- Technical advice and support to school staff
- End of year data analysis report. This is an oft overlooked but critical point as fiscal resources are limited. A recent national cost-benefit study conducted by Columbia University concluded that for an average per capita cost of \$1,300 for bully prevention, youth empowerment programming, middle level students realized a benefit of \$3,200. Using cost – benefit budget software such as ForeCast5, which my current district uses, Oregon school districts are or will be able to calculate a “return on investment” based on student outcome data.

The National Institutes of Health and the Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics are replete with studies demonstrating the associations between bullying and impaired academic achievement, psychological distress, and the bullied individual’s belief that it is not wrong to take a gun to school. Statewide our school systems continue to be “first responders” in identifying and addressing our students’ health and social service needs. Proactive and prevention based programs such as Ophelia’s Place demonstrate the power of programming called for in Senate Bill 180. This bill speaks to the potential of Oregon school districts to positively impact the lives of all of Oregon’s students, especially our state’s students impacted by poverty, whether urban or rural. Senate Bill 180 is legislation that would allow Oregon school districts to deliver on the promise to change and affirm the lives of our most precious resource, Oregon’s children and our state’s future. Thank you.