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Dear Chair Doherty and members of the House Education Committee,

I'm writing to you today to ask you to please support House Bill 3015, a bill that would close the loophole in Oregon's tuition program for children.

In September of 2017, I became a foster parent to a young girl named Nickeeta whose mother Sunita had passed away suddenly in March of that year. Nickeeta was born in Oregon, but neither of her birth parents were US citizens, and her birth father had been criminally deported. In the six months before Nickeeta was placed with me, Sunita's former in-laws, who are not Nickeeta's biological grandparents, took temporary custody. You can imagine how difficult it would be to take on a pre-teen child in your 70's and as much as they love her, they were simply unable to care for her long-term.

Prior to taking Nickeeta, I'd fostered two other children who had high-care needs. When Nickeeta came to me, she was difficult, still grieving, and needed a lot of attention. But I fell in love with her and didn't want someone to come in and adopt her who didn't understand her, or her passions. I decided that because our connection was so strong, and we'd worked so hard to get her to a better place, that I would see this through until she was an adult. I know what her needs are, and I want her to do well. Frankly, she makes me a better person.

This June, I'm hoping to finalize the adoption process. But I think it's important to get on the record that funding for foster care children in Oregon barely covers a child's basic needs, and certainly doesn't leave much left over to plan for a child's long-term costs like college. As a single mom about to adopt a young girl who will be 12 years old soon, I've lost out on the first two-thirds of Nickeeta's life to save and plan for her college costs, as I would have if she had been mine as an infant. I'm blessed to have a successful career with Providence Health, but in a blink Nickeeta will be headed to college.

Passing House Bill 3015 will lift a huge burden from my shoulders. Nickeeta is a bright girl with a road of possibilities in front of her, but without some help for college costs, it will be difficult to put those opportunities in front of her. Had I simply chosen to be a long-term foster placement for Nickeeta, the current law would cover her tuition if she aged out of the system. But as a foster parent, I also understand how important it is we give young teens a lifetime of permanency. A foster child shouldn't have to choose between a forever home or a college education.

By saying YES today to House Bill 3015, the Legislature is unlocking the potential to see more children, particularly difficult-to-place teens, be adopted out of foster care. Kids need a lifetime of support. Don't make families choose between forever homes and a tuition benefit to which they are otherwise entitled.

Thank you for your consideration.

Kelly Kirk
Nickeeta's Mom