

Testimony before the Oregon Legislature
In Support of SB 580
Gordon Lafer

Chair Dembrow and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing. My name is Gordon Lafer. I'm a professor at the University of Oregon's Labor Education and Research Center and an elected member of the Eugene 4J School Board, though I am not testifying on behalf of anyone other than myself.

I am testifying in strong support of SB 580.

Our overstuffed classes – some of the worst in the country – take a deadly toll on students – a toll that every parent knows. I have seen this first-hand with my own daughter – trying to learn middle school math in a class with 37 kids – and as a school board I have heard similarly heartbreaking or enraging stories from countless parents. In the community hearings and surveys we conducted last year – when we were trying to figure out how to allocate new funds under the Student Success Act – parents desire for smaller classes was one of the most commonly voiced demands, by parents of every ethnic, language and economic group.

Thirty years ago we had much smaller classes – and partly for that reason, Oregon's school system was the envy of much of the country. We are not a poorer state now than we were 30 years ago – on the contrary, we are a much richer state. If we have the resources to do this and don't do it, it is simply abandoning our children.

As a school board member, I am deeply disappointed in my own organization – the Oregon School Boards Association – for opposing this legislation on grounds that I believe are factually incorrect and wrong-headed.

OSBA suggests that school boards bargaining over class size will result in ineffective "one size fits all" policies. But this is factually false – in the many places that negotiate class size, there are often agreements to target class size reduction to specific groups of students. Personally, if we have limited budget resources, I would target funds to significantly lowering class sizes in kindergarten through third grade and in our Title I schools where students' need

is greatest. There is absolutely nothing that stops us from negotiating an agreement for targeted class-size reduction.

More broadly, I'm afraid that the general tone of OSBA's opposition to this issue – such as when it suggests that teachers might use this law to negotiate higher salaries for themselves without improving class size at all -- sounds like replaying old-fashioned stereotypes that picture teachers as the "enemy," who try to get selfish things at the expense of students, and who school districts need to face down. These negative stereotypes should have no place in our policy-making.

Anyone who believes that school teachers went into their profession because they figured it was the way to make the most money with the least effort – has no grasp on the reality of how our schools work.

The truth is that everyone who is involved in the day-to-day work of our schools knows that the whole system would collapse but for the fact that school staff devote so much unpaid time and effort to doing right by their students.

- Every year, every Oregon teacher spends an average of almost \$400 out of their own pocket to provide their students with needed supplies for art projects or science labs.
- In this year of COVID, teachers have gone so far above and beyond their job duties to make distance learning work as well as possible – often contributing hundreds of hours of unpaid time mastering new technologies, adapting curriculum to online platforms, and walking students through the new programs – that there is no way we could ever compensate them for this.
- In fact, the brightest spot in recent school funding – the Student Success Act – became a political consensus in part because thousands of teachers gave up a day of their own pay to demonstrate support for the legislation.

Wanting to bargain over class sizes is not a selfish act, but the opposite – it probably means taking away money that could have gone to pay raises, in order to make education better for kids and to enable teacher to do their job more professionally.

As a school board member, I can tell you that we *need* the expert input that can only come from those who work inside our classrooms every day. To say we don't want to hear from teachers – on an issue as central as class size – is like running a hospital and saying "I don't want to hear anything doctors or nurses

might have to say about where we could improve operations," or building a building and saying "if the electricians or plumbers have ideas about how to make the building's systems work better, I don't want to hear about it."

Engaging in bargaining over this issue enables school districts and school boards to address this problem in the most serious way, but talking with those who know the most about it.

Finally, making this a subject of bargaining will force all of us to address it, rather than continue kicking it down the road. Every year we say something like "yeah, class size is terrible, but we can only afford to shrink it by 1 or 2 kids and that's not effective, so let's just do nothing." We've been saying that for decades, as the quality of our kids' education gets worse and worse.

Having to bargain over something does not mean you have to agree to anything – whatever ends up in a contract is only what makes sense to both sides. But it will force all of us to pay attention to this critical issue. If instead we make it easy for everyone to ignore it, letting our schools slide year by year into worse conditions, we will be doing a huge disservice to our children.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Gordon Lafer