



Portland, OR | Dallas, TX

Dear Oregon Department of Education Board,

I was able to witness a portion of your call on Thursday before having to attend to some work matters. I offer this letter in response to requests from board members noting the lack of Latino and male voices in the reopening discussion.

My Background. My father was born into a Spanish-speaking household of Mexican migrant workers. My mother is Anglo, whose family has roots in Oregon going back to the 19th Century. My wife is Ecuadorian-American.

My household is proudly Latino/Latinx.

Education was very simply the means of advancement for my Latino family. As a child, my father traveled throughout the western United States while his parents picked crops for a good portion of his youth. There was no easy path for Chicanos in south Texas in the first half of the 20th Century, but my family believed firmly that the American dream could be achieved through education.

Mi abuela (grandmother) was the first Mexican-American graduate of her high school. All 5 of her children would graduate high school and then college; 2 would go on to obtain law degrees. My uncle was the first Mexican American to win statewide election in the state of Texas and served on the Texas Supreme Court for nearly fifteen years. My father is a former federal prosecutor and retired trial judge.

There was no silver spoon for this side of the family – they raised themselves through education.

From that vantage point, the elimination of in-person school is devastating to belief and pursuit of the American dream. Without access to a quality education, my family simply could not have raised itself up. Our generational responsibility is to assure opportunity for the next generation – functioning schools is central part of that responsibility.

Father/Business Owner. I am also a small business owner, whose workforce is 50% of color or Hispanic.

As father/business owner, I have less burden than my wife or the thousands of working mothers in this state during school closures who are saddled with primary care/education demands; their burdens are real and can most appropriately be articulated by them, but I can offer some specific antidotes as a business owner operating in multiple states:

1. My wife works in our business and has had to bear the majority of care and educational demands during Covid. She also lost her Ecuadorian uncle to Covid this summer.



2. Our black paralegal lost her mother-in-law and brother-in-law to Covid this summer. Her husband also suffered dearly from the virus, but is now on the mends.
3. We have had 2 clients get very ill from Covid.
4. Our business has lost a great deal of productivity in part because education and care has fallen on our parents of school-aged children.

Covid is real and vivid in our household and business: it is not something that affects other people, it affects us, particularly those most at risk in our circle. I pray for the health of my parents and in-laws. While Covid has hit us, in every case it is hitting those with preexisting conditions, who can be protected with targeted protections going forward; the lock-down is hitting our children and working parents.

My wife badly wants our children to return to school. Our paralegal returned her children to sports as soon as possible. In her state children have the option to do online school or in-person; she opted initially for online for her children, doing an ongoing evaluating of what it is best for her family. I will return to the question of choice in a bit.

Damage Caused by Slow-Moving State. As a father, I have been increasingly concerned that discussion around Covid and education has been reduced to a red v. blue fistfight in a contentious election year and obscured discussion around data and shared values.

For that reason, a group of us recently started an Open Portland Schools family group to focus on the data. Founders of the group are mostly urban democrats that are deeply concerned about both the national dialogue on the subject as well as the slow pace of democratic state leaders in updating policy in-light of better understanding of the scope and longevity of Covid's impact.

Beyond classroom impacts, OHA and Department Education slow-walking reassessment of metrics has a number of downstream ramifications. This year for the first time in 40 years, our recreational soccer program in Portland could not offer a league. This impacted 10,000 youth in the city of Portland. The cause – OHA very slow process to update guidance on sports came too late for fall season; despite months of data that outdoor youth activities in other states did not contribute to the spread of Covid. Even when OHA recognized what had been patently obvious for months, school fields are still largely closed because of Department of Education guidance that school grounds should be closed if school is not in session.

I fully recognize the incredible pressure Covid has placed on our local and state institutions, but simply put we need to elevate the dialogue and balance legitimate safety concerns brought on by Covid against the educational needs of our children and societal benefits of functioning schools.

Metrics and Policy. The question should not be when to reopen schools, but how to do so safely as soon as possible along with our libraries and parks.

As a general matter, in setting metrics and policy around in-person v. online education:



1. *Traditional Education Metrics Must be Considered.* We should be tracking instructional hours in classroom, educational attainment, hours of physical activity, and children's mental health metrics alongside Covid infection numbers. To focus on the latter to the exclusion of traditional education metrics is an abdication of stewardship of educational institutions.
2. *Tangential Effects of Lock-Down.* Increased rates from homicide, suicide, and substance abuse rates resulting from discontinuation of in person education needs to be measured along with incremental mortality from in-person schools.
3. *Long-Term Impacts on Children and Parent from Lock-Down.* Projected employment and quality of life impacts from discontinuation of in-person education must be compared to long-term health effects of Covid for students/staff resulting from in-person school.
4. *Long-Term Attractiveness of State.* For my nearly 30 years in this state, it has had a good reputation for public schools and functioning government. Failure to offer a quality education over a sustained period of time may greatly reduce the attractiveness of the state.

Specific to current metrics used regarding Covid:

1. **Oregon's Low Testing Rates.** Any requirement around positive testing rates, needs to take into approach to testing. Oregon's has until recently tested asymptomatic at very low rates; this in turn artificially overstates our positive rate.
2. **Portland's Healthy Population and Hospital Capacity.** Metrics tied to required rates of infection need to take into account the relative health of population, hospital capacity and improving outcomes for those with Covid. Portland in particular continues to have high levels of overall health and hospital capacity relative to other US cities; we can shoulder the burden of some risk of increased infections if justified by significant societal benefits, such as open schools. Oregon is a physically health state, but it also a state that struggles with drug addiction and depression; I worry that our response to Covid is more damaging than Covid itself here.

Two final observations – first, giving the varied of realities across the state, urban/rural, public/private, and apparent longevity of Covid, it behooves you to consider moving from state mandates to state guidance. Let school districts, private schools, and parents navigate these challenges in a way that reflect their local tradeoffs on benefits and risks; as a state provide them tools and best practices, but please, please get out of the way of returning to traditional school functionality.

Second, we need to move in earnest in returning to functioning in-person schools. Whether in the city or rural communities, schools are a center of community well beyond the time in classroom. Your decisions have downstream ramifications beyond what locals "can" and "cannot do"; your words and actions have frozen downstream communal life. Sports, band,



school plays are all part of our communal fabric. Our children and caregivers (mostly mothers) are suffering badly, and the quality of life that attracted us to Oregon has eroded terribly. Winter rains are coming soon to the worst year in our lifetimes; we need to raise our communities up that have reasonable physical health but often suffer from depression and give them hope; it can start with schools.

The livability of our state is very much in question right now; lets rise up and provide intelligent policy that meets the needs of our state and allows for local and family variance; but let's not wait, every day schools are closed is a lost day for education, working parents and for our communities.

Artifex Partners LLC

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rene Gonzalez", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail that extends downwards and to the right.

Rene Gonzalez, Managing