

Senate Committee on Education
Re: Testimony on SB 617- Relating to inclusive education

Dear Chair Senator Dembrow, Vice Chair Senator Thomsen, and members of the Senate Committee on Education,

My name is Rosa Colquitt. I am writing in full support of SB 617.

Currently, I am a resident of Washington County, but formerly lived in Clackamas County, where my children were educated in the Lake Oswego public school system. I identify predominantly as African American, with ancestral bloodlines in the Cherokee Indian Nation of North Carolina.

Education has been central to my family's life experiences and well-being, but particularly so for my children, growing up Black in a predominantly white state. It is imperative that the Oregon public school system provides all students with meaningful instruction to create an equitable, culturally-responsive learning experience. This means an educational experience with a curriculum representative of America's diverse and rich range of cultures. African American authors, thinkers, and history-makers have shaped so much of what it means to be an American, and for our school system to overlook their contributions and experiences is to deny students a key understanding of what it means to live in this country. Since lived experience plays a unique role in bringing educational concepts to life, our state should also do more to provide students with textbooks by African American authors.

The directives for the State Board of Education outlined in SB 617, regarding "meaningful instruction" to represent African Americans' unique contributions to the development of Oregon and the United States, will be a critical first step in overcoming many of the institutional barriers to equality that are woven into the very fabric of our society.

All students need strong, positive role models to help shape their values and beliefs. Teaching African American students about their history of accomplished figures, such as the Black women engineers and mathematicians whose critical work made it possible for the Americans to orbit the Earth, allows them to envision themselves in these roles and to make an important connection to their self-identities. Teaching African American students about their rich cultural heritage builds pride, self-confidence, and social skills, and inspires them to dream big and work toward great deeds of their own! Inclusive education for African Americans increases student achievement and the potential for longer-term academic success. Because SB 617's directives make our students' education more inclusive, I believe we must pass it without delay, so that we may invest today in the students who will lead us tomorrow, both in Oregon and nationally.

I also note also that teaching students who are not Black about the historical contributions of African Americans in shaping every aspect of American history helps them better understand, appreciate, and value their Black peers and their cultural experience. The inclusive classroom instruction engendered by SB 617 provides the opportunity for meaningful dialogue and cross-cultural student learning.

To truly move Oregon forward, we must eradicate discrimination in education. Inclusive educational practices like those contained in SB 617 will help provide African American students with a fair shot at completing high school and going on to pursue their futures. But for this to happen, the Committee on Education must move SB 617 forward with all due speed. I strongly urge you to do so.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my testimony.

Sincerely,
Rosa Colquitt, PhD
President, Greater Portland, National Organization for Women (GP NOW)