

April 21, 2021

To: Oregon Senate Education Committee  
From: Jesse Blackburn  
Re: Support for House Bill 2056-1

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Thomsen, and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Jesse Blackburn (she/her), and I'm a constituent of Senate District 23 in Portland, Oregon. I am writing to express emphatic support for HB 2056 and amendment -1, based on my experience with multilingual and emergent bilingual students.

Dedicated to equitable education outcomes for more than 20 years, I've provided professional learning for PreK-16 pre-service and in-service educators. My research background includes language acquisition, as well as the linguistic and social-emotional conditions for effective learning and academic success. As adjunct faculty at Portland State University, I teach English to speakers of other languages. I also support Oregon Tribes and Native students in their teaching and learning of their endangered heritage languages.

HB 2056-1 is a huge step toward equitable outcomes in Oregon's education system, as it "expands high school diploma requirements related to completion of credits in English to allow completion of credits in language arts" of other languages as well. This expansion would honor a student's existing linguistic skills and their cultural identity, both of which we know promote their success in English and all academics. Skills in one language are transferable to another. Credentialing additional languages makes use of the different tools students might already have for acquiring and engaging with academic content. And importantly, a learner can only reach their potential when they feel safe, seen, and welcome as a whole person, including family and heritage.

Multilingual skills and associated cognitive flexibility are valuable in college and career, so it only makes sense that high school graduation requirements are meaningfully aligned with that value. This legislation will reward the accomplishments of multilingual students -- leveling the playing field and adding graduation incentive for hard-working immigrant and refugee students, and Native students committed to learning their heritage language. As someone who's worked with youth on both sides of that high school diploma, I know there's intense motivation in studying a subject that personally matters to you, and to the world beyond high school.

Additionally, when we consider that Oregon's education system was historically instrumental in the destruction of Indigenous language and culture, HB 2056-1 presents as an opportunity to fulfill our Title VI obligations, supporting revitalization of these students' languages and cultures. This credit change would be a meaningful recognition of the supreme commitment that Native language students make — investing time, heart, and brainpower in learning from Elders or other culture bearers in their community. Learning your heritage language is more than learning a system of sounds and grammar — it's relating to other speakers, and imbedded within the language and its use are the cultural values and wisdom that have guided Native peoples for thousands of years. These are the skills and knowledge that sustain Native students and Native communities, and that will later serve those students and their projects well, no matter their focus in college or career.

Whether for obligation or outcomes, education that embraces all families, languages, and cultures enables success for all Oregon students. For these reasons, I commend the ODE-COSA Emergent Bilingual Visioning Workgroup for developing this important bill, and I strongly urge you to support HB 2056-1.

Sincerely,

Jesse Blackburn, MA