

April 22, 2021

Oregon State legislature
Senate Committee on Education
Chair Michael Dembrow
Vice-Chair Chuck Thomsen
Re: testimony on SB240

Chair Dembrow, Vice-chair Thomsen, and members of this education committee,

For the record, My name is Tonia Gebhart I am the chief operations officer at Metro East Web Academy (MEWA) and an officer on the board of Oregon Digital leaders coalition (ODLC), a non-profit organization that promotes quality virtual K-12 learning through education, support and advocacy. I am submitting my written testimony to expand on a few points as well as rebuttal of testimony presented on 4/21/2021.

As a charter school, we firmly believe in school choice. We understand that for many children, the traditional school system is enough for these students to excel and grow. This is evident by the 80%-85% state graduation rate. However, for the remaining 15%-20%, this model is not serving their needs for a variety of reasons. The performance and structure of for-profit virtual schools were mentioned in testimony. It is an important distinction to make that over 70% of virtual students attends not-for profit schools and programs.

To address graduation rates, MEWA had 58% of HS students transfer to us in 19-20 credit deficient. Of those 58%, 75% of those students were more than 2 credits behind. We get a lot of scrutiny over our graduation rate, so I think it is an important statistic to mention. We had 129 seniors transfer in during 19/20. 70% of them were behind in credits. Statistically, we would then expect a 30% graduation rate from these students. 57% of these off track seniors were a year or more behind. We had a grad rate of 64% last year- bringing many of these students back on track to graduate them on time.

We are also aware that virtual learning is different: it requires self-determination, discipline and time management to be successful. We approach learning from a family aspect, understanding that many young students need additional support in these areas. We are also aware that virtual learning is not a one-size fits all approach either- same reason not all traditional brick and mortar students are successful. MEWA issued over 4700 college credits to students in the 2019-2020 school year and the school has designed robust learning opportunities through CTE and other business partnerships. We offer robust learning opportunities with the flexibility to support many lifestyles and home situations.

Timing of an application, when the resources are available in virtual schools isn't equitable to the families or the students. This year alone, ODE processed over 800 appeals of students wanting to transfer to a virtual charter school that were previously denied by their home district. Not all families submitted an appeal; many decided to find other alternatives such as home schooling or if they have the ability, private school.

It was extremely heartbreaking to hear of stories of struggle and not able to support these families. Especially since the denials were simply a matter of timing. We had space and resources to enroll students, but because they submitted their applications after the district reported their numbers, they were denied. How is it equitable when one student is allowed while another is denied?

We would like to see all students have an opportunity to make a decision that works best for their education, removing barriers to allow them to flourish in an environment that works for them. A point that was brought up was the lack of funding for district schools if virtual schools increased their cap. In reality, many of these families sought school choice elsewhere choosing to homeschool or transfer to a private institution after denial. We shouldn't sacrifice a small percentage of students' educational experience only for the sake of adding more funding to a system that does not encapsulate all students' successes.

For the equity and support for all children, I am asking for your support in removing the 3% cap on these enrollments.

Thank you for your time and consideration on this issue.

Sincerely,

Tonia Gebhart