



Date: February 23, 2021
To: House Education Committee, Chair Alonso Leon and Members
From: Laurie Wimmer, OEA Government Relations
RE: HB 2697 [Banning bias, hate symbols, and speech in schools]

On behalf of the Oregon Education Association (OEA) and our 41,000 members, I am writing to support HB 2697, a bipartisan bill to address discriminatory conduct, symbols of hatred, and hate speech in schools.

As educators, we have seen firsthand the devastating impact that hate speech and symbols have on the learning environment of our students. We know that bias incidents occur too often, and that these harms have lasting impact on both their intended victims and those who witness them. As we told the State Board of Education when it considered an administrative rule on this topic, ensuring student health and safety in this respect will help keep our learning environments safe and welcoming, free from bullying, racism, and all manner of discrimination and harassment.

Simply put, hatred has no place in our schools. When students walk into a classroom or log on to a virtual learning space, they should be entering an educational environment in which they experience the safety and comfort necessary for learning and academic discovery. Hate symbols, speech, and discriminatory behavior diminish that learning environment and often lead to violence.

By their very nature, such conduct creates trauma. When they become targets of hate speech or antagonism, students' body chemistry may be altered. Their blood pressure increases, their cortisol levels rise – in short, they undergo a stress response that creates trauma and inhibits their ability to learn. In many situations, we have seen racist symbols and other acts of bias lead to physical violence, necessitating educator action.

The adoption of this legislation will help Oregon's educators combat acts of discrimination and also help to dismantle the institutional racism that has plagued our public schools for generations.

As OEA President John Larson said in a public statement earlier this year:

“Our failure to address institutional racism, structural racism, and white privilege has resulted in generations of trauma and harm for individuals and communities, manifesting itself every single day in an unfathomable number of ways, often perpetuated by institutions of the state. The students for whom we care deserve a school system in which they feel safe and where their unique identities are respected and valued.”

If we hope to build a public-school system that truly nurtures every student and provides the learning environment needed to thrive, we must continue to take bold action.

It is long past time that we put the needs of our historically marginalized students at the forefront of our work, and this bill represents one more way to do just that. We urge the committee to pass HB 2697. Should it be signed into law, our members stand ready to implement it, to help create the schools that every Oregon student deserves.