

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Forrest Cooper, I am a teacher on special assignment, running a district online school as an alternative to our in-person instruction. In our Fern Ridge district, we have about 7.5% of our k-12 students in our virtual school.

These students enjoy significant advantages over remote online schools. For example, we have an office, a drop in lab, same-day zoom tutoring, a person on the phone, packets for same day pickup. We work with local schools, SPED personnel and food services to make sure student needs are covered, and occasionally make trips to student homes to deliver food, study packets or just to check on a non-responsive parent/student.

Students maintain a connection to their local school and opportunities to be involved in extracurricular activities, and attend some classes, such as shop, art and music.

Local distance learning can be far more engaging than remote distance learning, if the state will establish rules and requirements that strike a balance and encourage robust programs, but don't discourage districts from setting up these programs to serve this student population.

It is important, especially in our digital age, to incentivize districts to innovate, much as we did with charter schools over the last 20 years. Capping student transfers is an important incentive. If we focus on parent choice only and do not incentivize schools, the public program will continue to decline in quality, and the dollar drain on the local program creates inequities—especially when both parents or a single parent is working. Local programs have to cut funding and increase class sizes when students exit the system, and many parents do not have the means or circumstances to be a learning coach at home, so their students do not get a choice about their schooling. Also, the impact of removing the cap is extreme budget uncertainty for districts for next year. Witness the Portland Public Schools budget, forecasting the loss of 7000 students, and the fact that across Oregon we are down 30,000 students this year.

Sometimes the decision for parents to move their child to a remote virtual school disregards the best interest of the student—it is more about the convenience to the parent. A local program can keep a close eye on the situation, as we have, sometimes involving local authorities when a student is not being provided the means for an education. In addition, regular public school virtual programs require Oregon-certified teachers, while Charters and other virtual programs have more latitude to include non-certified teachers.

The rules around attendance definitely need some upgrading. The state currently uses the term “significant interaction” within a 24-hour time period, to define attendance, and at the 6-12 level, this has been in a majority of classes. The rule makes it complicated to take attendance because students have different numbers of classes. For example, in a block program, a 3 period or 4-period student is full time. The 4-period student needs to be in three classes to be fully present, or can be absent for a half day, but the 3 period student is either fully present by attending two classes or fully absent by attending one class. We really need an “active time” requirement—I recommend 2 hours at elementary, 2.5 hours at middle school 6-8, and 3 hours at high school.

Some programs, such as Imagine Learning, keep track of idle time based on student keystrokes or mouse movement. Most do not, which is a problem.

Lastly, the state really needs to hold schools to the certification requirement. Some programs, such as Accelerate Learning, do not allow a school to buy a program with a certified Oregon teacher. We should require a local, Oregon-certified teacher to be involved where public dollars are being directed.

Thanks for considering the best route forward for these online programs.

Sincerely,

Forrest Cooper

Director, Options Distance Learning Program, Fern Ridge School District