



Oregon School Employees Association

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Senate Committee on Education
Sen. Michael Dembrow, chair

Dear Chair Dembrow and committee members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of Senate Bill (SB) 489. My name is Sarah Wofford and I am the state president of Oregon School Employees Association (OSEA). My background is as a classified accounting specialist at Rogue Community College in Grants Pass, and having, as an OSEA chapter president, helped many of our members navigate the unemployment nightmare of the pandemic in 2020.

OSEA represents about 23,000 workers in nearly all levels of public education, including Head Start programs, K-12 school districts, ESDs, community colleges and special districts. OSEA members perform many of the tasks that keep Oregon public schools safe and functional for students, administrators and teachers.

Our members know that it's hard to get by on school employee wages, even in a good year. Due to the "reasonable assurance" test for school employees claiming unemployment insurance (UI) benefits in the summer, they rarely get approved, if they even file. They either stretch nine or ten months of wages over a year or they supplement with other income. The burden, as it so often does for working families, falls disproportionately on lower wage workers, women, and people of color.

These groups are the core of OSEA, and we're proud to bring you Senate Bill (SB) 489, which would finally end the unique barrier to UI benefits that applies *only* to public education employees. Let me say this again: our members, who've struggled with disrespectful wages and are overwhelmingly women, and many of them are people of color ~~as well~~, are the *only* group of workers singled out for individual assessments by Employment Department staff, so that they can be denied UI benefits if it's *likely* that they'll have a job when school starts again.

Not only is the current system not helpful to school employees, it's downright disrespectful. Federal unemployment law refers to them as "nonprofessional" education employees. In the face of that, because our members do sometimes need the support of UI benefits, they will take the hit to their pride represented by asking for UI.

Imagine, in that situation, being told, "You don't need help. The chances are you'll have a job again in 10 weeks." I don't know any grocer, landlord or bank that's going to go for "the chances

are” you’ll pay them. But that is the level of respect and support that our school employees are receiving under existing law.

Do not doubt that many OSEA members are economically fragile. One of our members in Washington County, sadly, lost her house during the unemployment fiasco in 2020. But we know that having access to UI benefits makes a difference. One of our members who has equal access to UI benefits – covered by the 2021 bill that passed 22-6 in the Oregon Senate and 46-9 in the House – filed because she needed the money and followed all the rules and looked for work. She got just \$154 in weekly UI benefits this past summer, but that was critical to her buying groceries while she was looking for work.

That little bit of extra economic stability, and respect, is what we need for the remaining classifications of school employees, covered by SB 489.

It will not surprise you that lacking equal access to UI benefits is one of the reasons that school employees feel that they aren’t valued, respected and supported in their jobs. There is nothing equivalent to the “reasonable assurance” test for other public employees or any private sector workers. Federal unemployment law doesn’t require Oregon to use the “reasonable assurance” test and eliminating it can only help our efforts to recruit and retain skilled professionals in the classifications where we are having so much difficulty staffing, such as bus drivers and special education assistants.

Thank you for your favorable consideration of SB 489,

Sarah Wofford
President
Oregon School Employees Association

