

April 14, 2023

Joint Committee on Ways and Means

Sen. Elizabeth Steiner

Rep. Tawna Sanchez, Co-Chair

Co-Chairs Steiner and Sanchez and Honorable Committee Members:

I am Tim Stoelb, a Past President of Oregon School Employees Association and former classified school employee for the Roseburg School District. I am writing this testimony to ask for your consideration of an increase to the framework proposal for the State School Fund.

Classified employees are the first ones that students see in the morning and the last ones they see at the end of the day. They are the cooks, the bus drivers, the secretaries, the custodians, the maintenance workers, the IT staff, the education assistants, and many others. Classified employees take on those non-limelight tasks that make the schools run, often assuming additional duties because they “need to be done”.

When budget shortfalls occur, experience has shown that classified employees are the ones who incur the largest staffing reductions. Yet, despite all of this, we do our best to make our schools a safe and welcoming learning environment for our children. At the end of the day, classified employees want nothing but the best outcome for each child that walks through those school doors.

The co-chair budget framework has outlined that \$9.9 Billion for the State School Fund (SSF) in the 2023-25 biennium would be adequate to maintain current service levels. I would argue that this figure does not address the actual needs for our schools to properly provide a safe, quality education for our most valued resources – our students. To realistically meet those needs, it is my belief that a figure closer to \$10.3 Billion would be more suitable. I would like to briefly point out some of my reasoning to support a higher SSF budget figure.

One budgetary issue that must be taken into consideration is that the funding figures for the last two biennium periods have been impacted by COVID-19. During the pandemic, districts must have had at least some staffing reductions when schools migrated to on-line vs. in-person classes. Those reductions plus the empty facilities during those periods must have resulted in lower operating costs. Had we been holding classes in-person for that entire time actual expenditures would likely have been higher, and our projected “kicker” would have been less.

I see maintaining current service levels as nothing more than a flat, status quo budget. It does not allow for emergent needs such as newly mandated policy changes without accompanying funding. It prevents districts from bringing staffing back up to the necessary levels needed to

support the kids in the system today who need more social, emotional, behavioral, physical, and academic support than ever before.

The long vacant positions mentioned in the budget framework must be attributable at least in part to COVID-19. Now that the pandemic is essentially past, why not fill the positions instead of removing them and forcing the remaining staff to pick up the additional workload from those vacancies? Recruiting and maintaining qualified staff cannot be accomplished through a status quo budget. Providing required training for staff cannot be accomplished through a status quo budget. Districts have been increasingly reliant upon using volunteers to “fill the void” for years. While this may be seen by some as a good short-term budget-stretching move for some tasks, it must not be considered as a permanent solution. We are losing classified staff at an alarming rate – because they can’t afford to feed their families and stay.

Another important investment includes school security – which is a huge concern. We must provide every child the opportunity to learn in a safe, welcoming environment. Far too many acts of violence are occurring not just in Oregon but across the United States. I have seen the cycle of response around a school shooting too many times. First, a school shooting occurs, followed by the periods of “thoughts and prayers”, then finding blame (or excuses) for the incident, then calls for reforms, and ultimately – stone cold silence...at least until the next shooting occurs and then the cycle repeats. This abhorrent pattern needs to be broken.

Educational professionals, including classified staff, need to have increased resource officer presence in our schools. We need the proper training for our staff to recognize certain behaviors and de-escalate situations when they occur. We need the appropriate State support to ensure that schools have staff, including counselors to intervene and help those who may be considering committing an unthinkable act to either themselves or fellow students and staff. The physical security of our school facilities must be reviewed and improved. These things should not be kicked down the road – they can and need to be addressed now.

We all have the responsibility to do what is best for our children and that most certainly includes a quality education. Our children are our future, and I am calling on you to make that \$10.3 Billion investment.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Tim Stoelb

Oregon School Employees Association Past President