

April 28, 2023

Joint Committee on Ways and Means  
Sen. Elizabeth Steiner  
Rep. Tawna Sanchez, Co-Chair

Co-Chairs Steiner and Sanchez and Honorable Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of key investments to build a better Oregon with higher quality student-centered educational experiences for all students, workers, and working families.

My name is Chelsea Powers and I am one of the 23,000 members represented by the Oregon School Employees Association (OSEA). As a member of OSEA, I have a Bachelors of Science and more than 20 years of work experience in a variety of industries, from small businesses to multi-million dollar corporations to education. I am currently employed as a full time educational assistant at a Title 1 elementary school in Reynolds School District 7. Prior to becoming a permanent classified employee, I was a substitute in multiple districts in the Portland Metro area. I also have an elementary-aged child with special needs in the Portland Public Schools district.

While I am appreciative of the Co-Chairs of Ways and Means recommending a \$9.9 billion budget for K-12 in this economically challenging time, it is simply not enough. The state directed work is assessed at \$10.3 billion, which is a shortfall of nearly a half million dollars for an industry that is already struggling with supporting students and paying employees a livable wage. Reading my credentials above, I'd like you to make a guess at my yearly salary. Did you guess that I make a poverty wage? I am only able to work at a school because we are a two income household. This is one of the reasons that there is a shortage of classified employees. I can make more working entry level customer service jobs than I do supporting students in a school.

I fill in for other classified jobs around the school because we cannot get anyone to substitute or apply for these low-paying, low-hour jobs. Our district has struggled with payroll issues all year and it has most affected classified employees, some having to take out loans to make their rent payments or buy groceries. Many of my co-workers work additional jobs either before or after their school hours, as well as picking up tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school hours. Without proper funding to provide livable wages, school districts will continue to hemorrhage classified employees.

The amount of education I assist with every day has plummeted. Have you ever been slapped in the face at work? This is par for the course for many educational assistants, including myself. In an average week, working with both general and special education students in an elementary school, I am bitten, kicked, punched, spit on, have chairs and other objects thrown at me, and am called names too offensive to repeat. I know exactly how far a bottle of hand sanitizer shoots and how much it stings when it gets in your eyes. I have had my glasses broken multiple times by students ripping or hitting them off my face. My experiences are not unique or contained to just a few schools. My coworker recently had major surgery to repair an injury received from a student. These are just a few examples of how lack of funding and staff puts everyone in danger. (Please note that I receive a stipend to work with special education students of approximately \$60/year before taxes. This stipend is based on my yearly salary.)

This year I attended a two-day mandatory class with trauma-informed de-escalation techniques. The second

day of the class included, among other things, how to prevent having my hair ripped out and how to safely restrain students who are a danger to themselves and/or others. I have never received mandatory training on how to assist with education. I, like many other classified staff members, have created a self-funded daily carry pack containing items for personal protection. A few of the contents of mine are: earplugs for when students use weaponized screaming, protective sleeves to prevent students from getting a grip on me when biting, scratching, or pinching, and rubber gloves for safely dealing with blood when injuries occur. New staff are warned to make sure their lanyards have a safety release to prevent being strangled. The general and special educational assistant classified staff at my school have developed a non-verbal color coded card system that we carry on our ID badges for when verbal communication through our radios will further escalate a student. I wonder every day if today will be the day that one of our students makes good on their multiple threats and I have to use my lockdown training for real. This is not how fully funded and staffed education looks. The state is failing our kids by withholding these desperately needed funds. Would you endanger yourself daily to be paid below the poverty line? That is what you are asking classified employees to do with these inadequate allocations.

These funds are absolutely critical to support the social, emotional, behavioral, physical and academic health of Oregon's students. Those who work outside the education system do not fully comprehend what it is like to be an employee in a school now. Students are being asked to learn more, earlier, and at a rapid pace while supports are stripped away and staff levels drop. Rapid transitions throughout the day, shortened break times, removal of free and accessible food, and transportation difficulties are just a few challenges being heaped on our students and staff. School employees have been expected to pick up the slack for too long and it is far past unsustainable. People accept and stay in classified jobs because we care about kids and we want students to be safe and successful. Many of us can name a caring school staff member who made a difference in our own childhood. But caring about students only goes so far when you cannot feed your own family or feel safe in your work environment. The recommended level of funding will not help Oregon's kids be safe and successful. It is continuing to put our schools at a deficit, setting both staff and students up for failure and tragedy.

We just don't have enough people to do what needs to be done for the students. Setting aside the \$10.3 billion appropriation for the State School Fund (SSF) in this session is just the first step. This committee has the ability to set an example and hold Oregon up as a model for how to make meaningful investments in the education workforce. Starting with higher quality jobs that have Just Cause in the employment agreement, funding for recruitment and retention of classified employees to have five-hour minimum work days or at least a 20% SPED differential, funding for the currently required de-escalation training and incident reports for classified staff who support special education students, and funding for culturally appropriate early childhood literacy.

Co-Chairs Steiner and Sanchez and Honorable Committee Members, you have an opportunity to make a positive meaningful impact in the lives of tens of thousands of Oregonians and I really hope you take it. Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony.

Sincerely,

Chelsea Powers  
Portland, Oregon

Cc. Sen. Lew Frederick, Subcommittee on Education, Co-chair  
Cc. Rep. Susan McLain, Subcommittee on Education, Co-chair

