

May 3, 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 support of full K-12 funding in Oregon, and OSEA's legislative priorities. My name is Kris Dowell, and I am the President of OSEA Centennial Chapter 113 in Gresham, Oregon.

As a member of OSEA, I am writing to express my deep concern about the current way we fund education, which has had a negative impact on the students of Centennial School District where I have worked for the past 10 years.

When I started as a classified employee, I was an educational assistant, where I learned first-hand how important our role is to the overall well-being of our most vulnerable students. Learning is already complicated under the best circumstances, and the conditions that our students face impact their learning even more. Unfortunately, the current funding system has made it even harder for us to support our students effectively.

Centennial is a small district with many students highly impacted by poverty. Our administrators often wear many hats, leaving no additional capacity to seek out grants or manage house bill funds. Every time the state budget starts coming out, our district begins to talk of uncertain funding and starts talking of cuts. This uncertainty makes it even harder for us to obtain and retain staff. For example, our classified staff positions are grossly understaffed this year, with only 16 out of 55 bus driver positions filled. At Centennial High School, we have had five open educational assistant positions all year. Every day, students go without the support they need because we do not have enough staff to ensure their needs are met. Next year, we will be bargaining, and our classified staff needs a transformative contract to be competitive with our neighboring districts. However, all we hear is the lack of money from the state.

Funding based on ADM is highly concerning at this point. For five years, I served as an attendance specialist for Centennial, and in that role, I saw firsthand that many of the students who are missing school really need additional support to be successful. The supports needed are people that are onsite ready to support them. Funding based on ADM also creates a dynamic where the school districts are going after absent children like bill collectors chase after funds. We need the funds in place so that students can just come to a school that is fully staffed and ready to serve them.

While we are very grateful to the Co-Chairs of Ways and Means for recommending a \$9.9 billion budget for K-12 in this economically challenging time, the work the state directs us to do is assessed at \$10.3 billion. We need to do more for Oregon's students, because they need more from us to support their social, emotional, behavioral, physical and academic health – now more than ever before.

Every day, I am here to help my students. People accept and stay in classified jobs because we care about kids, and we not only want those individual students to be safe and successful, but for Oregon to be safe and successful. To make sure we're on a successful path together, we need:

1. A \$10.3 billion appropriation for the State School Fund (SSF) this session, and
2. Meaningful investments in the education workforce, including:
 - Higher quality jobs that have Just Cause in the employment agreement
 - Funding for recruitment and retention of classified employees to have five-hour minimum workdays 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
 - Funding for culturally appropriate early childhood literacy

Oregon students deserve a \$10.3 billion budget for the SSF. It is the essential, core funding for all our public school districts. It funds the essential work of Oregon public education. It is the lifeblood that supports what classified employees are doing for Oregon students every day. We are the first to enter the building and the last to leave each night, to achieve our goal – Oregon's goal – to support all of Oregon's students.

Investing in public education must include investment in the education workforce. We just don't have enough people to do what needs to be done for the students. The people I work with are quitting left and right because they can't afford to stay. We need to increase the quality of classified jobs to keep our skilled workforce AND recruit more to help.

Education is a priority that requires consistent investments in addition to support for housing and behavioral health because these issues intersect and, if funded in concert, will mutually support Oregon's students and their families. Combined with the additional investments by this committee in our education workforce, these core budget elements will help ensure that we can really lift Oregon's students and families.

In Oregon, some communities can fill in the gaps that the state funding leaves, but Centennial is not a community that currently has that ability. This system is widening the achievement gap we are all working so hard to close. We need a better way to fund education that provides stability and predictability for our students and educators.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

Sincerely,

Kris Dowell, OSEA Centennial Chapter 113 President
Gresham, OR