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To: House Committee on Education
From: Jennifer McGowan, Supervising Attorney

Re: **HB 4084**

Dear Chair Neron, Vice-Chairs Hudson and Wright, and Members of the Committee,

Founded in 1975, Youth, Rights & Justice is Oregon's only non-profit juvenile public defense firm. Each year, we provide holistic, client-centered representation to hundreds of children, youth, and parents in Oregon's juvenile court system. Additionally, we provide early defense advocacy to keep families together and educational advocacy so children can attend, graduate, and succeed in school. In 2021, we launched our juvenile expunction clinic.

Through our advocacy for Oregon's children, youth, and parents, we often see the same systemic problems and we work to change the policies that contribute to these problems. One glaring systemic problem is that Black, Indigenous, Latinx people and other people of color are overrepresented in child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

YRJ SUPPORTS HB 4084.

Children in foster care are much more likely than their peers to struggle academically and fall behind in school. Oregon has been tracking four-year cohort graduation trends of young people in foster care since the 2016-2017 school year and the data collected through the 2019-2020 school year indicates less than 50% are graduating on time, compared with over 80% of all students in Oregon.¹ We also know that former foster youth are one-tenth as likely to earn a college degree (2.7% vs. 27.5% of the general population age 25 and older).²

“Numerous studies have confirmed that foster children perform significantly worse in school than do children in the general population. The educational deficits of foster children are reflected in higher rates of grade retention; lower scores on standardized tests; and higher

¹ <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/reports-and-data/students/Documents/CohortTrends22-23.pdf>

² Casey Family Foundation. (2005). “Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study”

absenteeism, tardiness, truancy and dropout rates. The poor academic performance of these children affects their lives after foster care and contributes to higher than average rates of homelessness, criminal involvement, drug abuse, and unemployment among foster care ‘graduates.’”³

Youth, Rights & Justice created our SchoolWorks program over twenty years ago after observing through our juvenile court representation of children and youth involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, the lack of school success and the poor educational outcomes our clients were facing. Since its creation, our SchoolWorks program has provided individual education advocacy in over 3800 cases to help our clients enroll in school, stay in school, succeed, and graduate.

Youth, Rights & Justice is passionate about addressing the educational disparities for children in foster care not only through individual advocacy in our SchoolWorks program but also through legislative efforts. Over the past twenty years, we have championed laws to prevent school changes for children who enter foster care or move foster homes; laws to help foster children who turn 18 go to college and access health care, and laws to eliminate zero tolerance discipline in schools and address the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of students of color—particularly for those in grades K-5.

Youth, Rights & Justice testifies today in support of HB 4084. The statistics demonstrating the poor educational outcomes for young people in foster care are clear and they identify a huge need for additional services and support. HB 4084 will provide education navigators who will coordinate wraparound support for children in foster care attending three different comprehensive high schools in Oregon. The data collected from this pilot will provide critical information to policy makers and community partners to guide future investments targeted to address the educational needs of young people in foster care, giving them a genuine opportunity for school success.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue.

³ Christian, S. (2003). “Educating Children in Foster Care,” National Conference of State Legislatures Children’s Policy Initiative.