

March 10, 2025

Subject: Testimony for Senate Bill 141

Dear Chair Frederick, Vice-Chair Weber, and members of the Senate Education Committee,

I serve as Vice President of Education for the national nonprofit [Results for America](#), where I work closely with the U.S. Department of Education, state education agencies, and school districts to make investing in what works the “new normal” so that government decision makers regularly and effectively use evidence and data to increase the impact of the over \$1.3 trillion that governments spend each year to open opportunities and advance economic mobility. I also have the privilege of serving on the Board of Directors of [Children’s Institute](#) and am the parent of a 4th grader and a 6th grader who attend public schools in Portland.

I am going to focus my remarks on **two key areas: early learning and evidence-based policymaking**.

On the early learning side, I applaud the inclusion of the regular early grade attendance metric. We have a significant and growing body of evidence demonstrating the impact of regularly attending school on student outcomes. We know, for example, that students who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade are much less likely to read at grade level by third grade – which could make them 4 times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers. We also know that attendance patterns form early: [nationally, more than 10 percent of kindergarteners and first graders are chronically absent](#). [In Oregon, this number is an astounding 45 percent of kindergartners and 39 percent of first graders](#). Waiting until 3rd grade to measure the extent to which our schools are serving students well is simply too late. The inclusion of the K-2 attendance metric will give us earlier visibility and opportunity to intervene and support our youngest learners.

Now I’ll turn to data and evidence. I cannot overstate the extent to which *what* we spend our money on matters when it comes to student wellbeing and academic outcomes. Too often, education dollars are spread across well-intentioned but unproven initiatives. The states that have rebounded fastest from pandemic learning loss consistently have consistently focused on a core set of evidence-based strategies: For example, Washington, D.C.’s successful [high-impact tutoring initiative](#), Connecticut’s [statewide campaign against chronic absenteeism](#) and Maryland’s investment in [high-quality math instructional materials](#).

SB 141 acknowledges the importance of focusing funding on evidence-based programs and practices but seems to equivocate on just how serious we are about investing in what works for students. This alarms me given the precariousness of our current public education system and Oregon’s position at the bottom national rankings in math and reading.

For example, the bill stipulates that schools that fail to meet performance targets for four consecutive years must spend “up to 25 percent of their State School Fund and Student Investment Account (SIA) allocations on state-directed ‘best practices’” but still gives *far too much time and latitude* to struggling

districts on how to spend their state funding. Waiting two to four years to intervene in schools and districts that have been consistently underserving students feels like a status quo response that centers the comfort of adults in our system over the critical needs of students and families across our state.

The bill's emphasis on state-provided 'intensive coaching' also worries me. The intent seems right, but in practice, I am concerned about ODE's capacity to effectively implement this model. Further, the success of intensive coaching hinges on the state's authority and ability to ensure districts maintain a laser-like focus on evidence-based instructional strategies aligned with high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), professional development, and research-backed interventions. The legislation reads light on these details, which concerns me. I'd prefer to leave less to chance when it comes to support for our highest-needs schools.

There are immediate steps that this bill should prompt. To combat decades of declining reading proficiency in Mississippi, the state provided training to every educator in evidence-based early literacy practices, required districts to implement high-quality curriculum rooted in the science of reading, and deployed instructional coaches to every corner of the state. They doubled down on what works, leaving nothing to chance. And they did this in partnership with state and local community-based partners and families. There is nothing preventing Oregon from taking a page from Mississippi's playbook - or Louisiana's for that matter, where education leaders have leveraged the grantmaking process to signal and fund a narrower set of proven programs.

One **cost-neutral** way to strengthen the likelihood that state funding is spent on programs and practices that will move the needle for kids would be to define and use the term '[evidence-based practices](#)' instead of 'best practices' throughout the proposed legislation. This would place much needed guardrails on our spending without requiring or prescribing what districts do.

There is precedent for this structure. [ORS 182.515-525](#) defines "evidence-based program" and requires agencies, including the Department of Corrections and Oregon Youth Development Council, to spend 75% of state funds on strategies that are evidence-based. I encourage you to set up a similar framework in this bill.

Governor Kotek was recently quoted as saying "investments cannot be a blank check" - a sentiment with which I very much agree and that this proposed bill aims to honor. With a few relatively minor but important changes, SB 141 can help usher in urgent and positive change for Oregon's more than 500,000-plus public school students.

Thank you,
Sara Kerr