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March 12, 2025

Testimony for the Senate Education Committee on **SB 141**: “Requires the Department of Education to study methods for increasing the accountability of the public education system of this state.”

Summary:

The Oregon Association for Talented and Gifted (OATAG) advocates for the needs of talented and gifted students statewide and supports families, educators, and communities. As an organization that serves as a point of contact for families that encounter problems with the administration of programs and services, we strongly support efforts to improve accountability within our public education system. While we agree with the intent of SB 141, we believe that a study conducted solely by the Department of Education is not the best approach. A broader task force that includes legislators, community-based organizations, families, students, and school district representatives would be more effective. Moreover, to ensure meaningful oversight and effective implementation of educational policies, existing accountability challenges must be addressed.

OATAG fully supports the goal of SB 141—to strengthen accountability in our public education system. However, a study conducted by the Department of Education is not the most effective way to achieve this goal. Because the Department will need to evaluate its own procedures among others, it lacks the necessary objectivity and external perspective.

We recommend establishing a broader task force that includes representatives from the Department of Education, legislators, community-based organizations, families, students, and school districts. Such a diverse body would be better positioned to evaluate our entire accountability system, identifying areas in need of reform and improving its effectiveness.

In our work with families, we have encountered these key accountability challenges:

1. **Lack of Rules Requiring Implementation:** While Oregon has strong education standards, the mechanisms to enforce them are inadequate. Many statutes and administrative rules require districts to *have* policies in place but do not mandate their actual *implementation*, rendering them unenforceable.
2. **Over-Reliance on Complaints:** The current system depends far too heavily on families and lower-level staff to file complaints. This process is always intimidating, raises concerns about retaliation, and can permanently damage relationships within school communities. Because

very few Oregonians are willing to submit a complaint, the Department of Education does not know about accountability problems experienced by families and staff every day.

3. **Failure to Enforce Standards:** Even when the Department of Education investigates and confirms noncompliance by districts, there is little to no follow-up to ensure that its final orders are adequate and effective or even that they are ever implemented or completed. Division 22 admissions of non-compliance also lack an effective and sustained response.
4. **Opaque and Legalistic Complaint Resolution:** The existing complaint resolution system is complicated, underfunded, and extremely slow. When appeals refer to student welfare or services, the affected students have often left their schools before there is any official response. This also discourages many complaints.
5. **Fragmented Oversight:** Accountability responsibilities are dispersed across various agencies, including the federal government, state legislature, Secretary of State, Governor's office, licensing commissions, State Board of Education, Oregon Department of Justice, and the Department of Education. The Department of Education is unwilling to exercise adequate oversight, and other bodies are unable to do so. The resulting confusion makes it difficult for anyone to ensure consistent accountability.
6. **Inaccessible Data Reports:** School and district-level reports, including report cards and student achievement data, are often unintelligible to the public. While these reports could serve as valuable accountability tools, efforts to simplify them have inadvertently removed critical details needed for informed decision-making.
7. **Neglect of High-Achieving and Gifted Students:** Any accountability system that consistently overlooks tens of thousands of our highest-achieving students is fundamentally flawed but many state reports systematically omit high-achieving and gifted students. They were explicitly excluded from the implementation of the Student Success Act and from the Quality Education Model's cost analysis. The "ESSA accountability details" on school and district report cards also omit them. Achievement test reports that merely show whether students are proficient or not proficient also conceal the status of high-achieving students. Research has shown that low-income and underserved populations experience the greatest learning loss at the top, not the bottom, of the ability distribution. Thus, an accountability system that focuses on low-achieving students will not remedy achievement gaps.

We hope that final passage of SB 933 will help improve this situation, and we thank the Education Committee for its support for that bill. However, given these significant issues, we also urge you to expand the scope of SB 141. Rather than another limited Department-led study, we need a comprehensive, inclusive task force to objectively evaluate our entire accountability system. Only through broad and transparent reform can we ensure that all students receive the quality education they deserve.

Respectfully submitted,

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NAEP 8th Grade Math, 90th Percentile Performance by Family Income



Source: NAEP Data Explorer • Created with Datawrapper

Source: “The return of accountability: And the growing, sizable gaps between high- and low-performing students, [Tim Daly](#), Mar 10, 2025

<https://edadvance.substack.com/p/the-return-of-accountability?>