

Todd Nicholson
Principal, Rivercrest Academy
Portland, Oregon

March 25, 2025

To:

Senator Kate Lieber, Co-Chair, Joint Committee On Ways and Means
Representative Tawna Sanchez, Co-Chair, Joint Committee On Ways and Means

Cc:

Senator Janeen Sollman, Co-Chair, Subcommittee On Education
Representative Ricki Ruiz, Co-Chair, Subcommittee On Education
Senator Lew Frederick
Senator Suzanne Weber
Representative Susan McLain
Representative Hoa Nguyen
Representative Boomer Wright
Representative Dwayne Yunker

Re: SB 5515 – Oregon Department of Education: Recovery Schools Funding

Dear Co-Chairs Lieber and Sanchez; Co-Chairs Sollman and Ruiz; and members of the Subcommittee on Education:

My name is Todd Nicholson, and I have the honor of serving as Principal of Rivercrest Academy, in Multnomah County –one of Oregon’s three operating recovery high schools. I write today to express my strongest support for the full \$12.7 million in funding requested by the Oregon Department of Education for recovery high schools in the 2025-27 biennium under Senate Bill 5515.

Without this full funding, our school — along with Harmony Academy in Clackamas County and Discovery Academy in Marion County — will be forced to make devastating cuts to services and student enrollment. Worse still, additional recovery school programs, currently preparing to open their doors in communities across Oregon, will be stopped before they even begin. These include programs in Southern Oregon, Eastern Oregon, the Oregon Coast, and Lane County — areas that desperately need these life-saving services.

At Rivercrest, we serve students who are recovering from substance use disorder and co-occurring mental health challenges. These students are some of the most vulnerable in our education system. They need more than just an education — they need safety, belonging, and support tailored to their recovery. Recovery high schools provide just that: a supportive academic environment with embedded recovery services, peer mentors, structured accountability, and a campus free from substances.

The difference this makes is profound. National research — and our lived experience at Rivercrest — shows that students attending recovery high schools are up to four times more likely to remain sober after six months than those who return to traditional school settings post-intervention. We see improvements in attendance, graduation rates, and mental well-being. In fact, recovery high schools consistently report graduation rate increases between 21-25% for students with substance use disorder.

This is not just an investment in students' academic futures — it is an investment in their health, safety, and long-term success. The return on this investment is clear: for every \$1 spent on recovery high school education, the state saves between \$3 to \$7 in reduced medical emergencies, re-treatment costs, and criminal justice involvement. That's up to \$52,000 in savings per student.

What's more, the 2023 Legislature made a bold and forward-thinking commitment through HB 2767, promising to open three new recovery high schools every biennium. The Governor's Recommended Budget, however, cuts ODE's recovery school funding in half — a move that directly undermines that commitment and would prevent the opening of any new schools in 2025-27. According to ODE's own Budget Scenario Analysis, even sustaining the three existing schools at current service levels will consume the full reduced allocation. There will be no room for expansion.

Oregon cannot afford to step back now. Recovery school expansion is essential to reaching youth in rural and underserved regions — exactly as HB 2767 intended. If we retreat on this promise, we turn our backs on students who are ready for recovery, but lack a school to support them.

On behalf of Rivercrest Academy, our students, and the broader recovery community, I urge you: prioritize the full \$12.7 million in funding for recovery high schools. With your leadership, Oregon can fulfill its commitment to student recovery, expand access statewide, and save young lives.

Thank you for your time and dedication to the well-being of Oregon's youth.

Sincerely,

Todd Nicholson

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Principal, Rivercrest Academy

Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission –Recovery Subcommittee

Portland, OR