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**Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education**

Good morning, Chair members of the Joint Subcommittee.

In 2016, I graduated from Springfield High School. During my senior year, if it weren't for the support of my ASPIRE mentors and the few teachers who believed in me, I may never have seen myself as someone who could succeed in college. I was a low-income foster youth, unsure of my place in higher education. I waited until the very last day to submit my application to the University of Oregon—unsure if I could afford it, unsure if I belonged there.

But I also knew that if I didn't try, I would be failing myself. I would be closing a door on a future I hadn't even had the chance to dream of yet.

Looking back, I now see how critical that support was. It was ASPIRE, my teachers, and generous programs like the Ford Family Foundation that showed me what was possible. And it was their belief in me that paved the way for where I am today.

That experience is why I chose to give back—by working to break down the barriers that once stood in my own way. I wanted to show even the poorest of students that there is a pathway to higher education. I wanted to be the person that ASPIRE had been for me: someone who provides information, encouragement, and the reminder that families are not alone in navigating this overwhelming process.

But today, that pathway is under threat.

The programs that make college possible for students like me—like ASPIRE and the Oregon Promise—are being asked to do more with less. And without adequate funding and statewide support, we risk closing doors for students who, like I once did, are searching for any reason to believe they belong in higher education.

I am both a beneficiary and a witness to the transformational power of state-supported college access programs. I am here today because I believe that every student in Oregon—regardless of income, zip code, or background—deserves the opportunity to pursue higher education without undue financial barriers.

My name is Ayla Caesar, and I am the College & Career Access Specialist for Sprague High School in the Salem-Keizer School District. I am writing today to provide testimony concerning SB 5525—the appropriation of moneys from the General Fund to the Higher Education Coordinating Commission for certain biennial expenses.

In Oregon, the allocation of funds to support low-income students has created an unintended consequence: a growing population of students whose families fall just above the poverty line. These families are often ineligible for financial assistance such as the Oregon Promise Grant, yet still cannot afford the increasing cost of higher education. As a result, a new "minority" bracket has formed—one in which students are systematically excluded from both funding and opportunity. I witness this daily in my population.

Currently, Oregon Promise eligibility is limited to students with a Student Aid Index (SAI) below \$25,000, excluding many middle-income households. These families do not qualify for grants but still face significant financial barriers to postsecondary education. According to recent data, Oregon invests approximately \$8,400 per public college student annually—well below the national average of \$11,000. This underfunding not only restricts access but also limits the state's ability to close the gap in college affordability.

An expansion of Oregon Promise to cover two years of community college tuition for **all** Oregon students—regardless of income—would be a critical step toward addressing this inequity. This action would promote access, close income gaps, reduce the risk of generational poverty, and reinforce the idea that higher education is not a privilege for the few, but a right for all.

Additionally, increasing funding to the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) would have a downstream effect in strengthening programs like **ASPIRE** (Access to Student assistance Programs In Reach of Everyone), which plays a vital role in improving college and career access across the state.

As of now, ASPIRE sites receive a grant not exceeding \$4,000 annually—**the only non-donation-based funding these programs receive**. For many schools, particularly those with large student bodies (some with populations exceeding 1,700), this funding is insufficient. A single field trip can consume \$600–\$800 of that budget due to transportation and staffing fees, leaving minimal resources to support sustainable programming or long-term planning.

Further, most ASPIRE sites operate with just **one College and Career Access Specialist**—a single staff member expected to support hundreds, if not thousands,

of students. This is not a scalable model and limits the program's potential to provide meaningful, individualized support. As more schools adopt ASPIRE, the current grant model becomes increasingly unsustainable. Without increased funding, we risk stagnating a program that is pivotal in guiding Oregon's youth through their postsecondary pathways.

By committing increased funding to HECC and programs like Oregon Promise and ASPIRE, the state of Oregon has a chance to lead boldly—ensuring all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, have the tools and resources they need to pursue higher education and build a stable, prosperous future.

I am living proof of what's possible when that investment is made. I was once a student standing at the edge of uncertainty, unsure if college was even within reach. But because someone believed in me—and because programs like ASPIRE existed—I found a way forward. Today, I stand not just as a graduate but as a mentor, a guide, and an advocate for the next generation.

Oregon has the opportunity to stop drawing lines that divide who gets access and who does not—and instead, to draw a line in the sand that says *every* student matters. Let's rise to meet the needs of our students, not ration opportunity. Let's make it clear that in Oregon, education is not a luxury—it's a right. And it's time we funded it like one.

## Works Cited

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