

VERNONIA SCHOOL DISTRICT 47J

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Jim Helmen
Superintendent, Vernonia School District
1201 Texas Ave
Vernonia, OR 97064
jhelmen@vernoniak12.org
503-429-5891
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Members of the Joint Ways and Means Committee
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court St NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Co-Chairs and Members of the Joint Ways and Means Committee,

As Superintendent of the Vernonia School District, I am writing to strongly support the *Siletz Valley School Revitalization and Safety Improvements* project. I offer this letter not just as a fellow school leader, but as someone who deeply understands the challenges that small, rural schools face in maintaining safe, functional, and inspiring learning environments for our students.

Siletz Valley School is a K-12 public charter that has long served as the heart and soul of its community, bridging the City of Siletz and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians. Like many charter schools in Oregon, they are locked out of traditional pathways for facilities funding. Because the school does not own the land, land that once belonged to the Tribe, they are ineligible for bond measures or many grant opportunities. And, like all public charters, their sponsoring district holds back 20% of their state school funding, a choice allowed but not required by statute.

Their needs are urgent and clear. The school facility, built in 1934, is aging rapidly. Heating is controlled manually by radios between the classrooms and the maintenance staff. Most classrooms lack air conditioning, and lighting in the gym presents hazardous waste concerns if repairs are needed. Gym bathrooms are not ADA accessible, and there are no dedicated science labs. Leaking pipes, damaged siding, roof issues, and unreliable internet access all compound the barriers to providing a stable, equitable learning environment. Most concerning, the school lacks basic modern safety features like secure doors and locks that protect children and staff in an emergency.

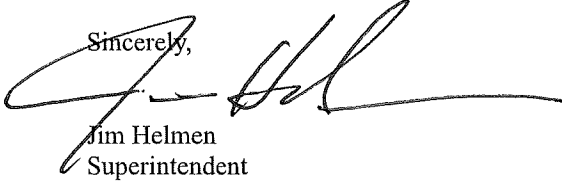
And yet, despite these circumstances, Siletz Valley School is achieving extraordinary outcomes. The school is home to Oregon's 2025 Small Schools Teacher of the Year. Its staff includes dedicated educators who have served the school for their careers. The school has built nationally recognized woodshop and culinary programs, a robust indigenous culture curriculum, a farm-to-table partnership with the Tribe, and a seafood program with local businesses. They also offer cutting-edge learning in robotics, drones, CAD, agriscience, and oyster farming. They have partnered with OSU SMILE, Hatfield Marine Science Center, Oregon Coast Community College, the Young Entrepreneur Program, and others. This level of excellence and engagement is remarkable, especially for a school with only 24 seniors in its graduating class.

This community has done everything right with the limited resources available to it. Now, they are asking for something very reasonable: a safe, modern facility that will allow them to continue serving students for another 30 - 50 years. This project will not only secure the school building but also honor the investment that educators, students, families, and community members have made in building something truly special in rural Oregon.

As someone who has seen firsthand the uphill battle small and rural schools face in accessing equitable resources, I urge you to support the *Siletz Valley School Revitalization and Safety Improvements project*. Our state has repeatedly committed to supporting all students, regardless of zip code. This is one of those moments.

Thank you for your continued service and your thoughtful consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'J. Helmen', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jim Helmen
Superintendent
Vernonia School District