

Position: IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 4149

House Committee on Education

Mary Ferrell, Executive Director, Maslow Project

February 9, 2026

RE: Support for House Bill 4149 – Educational Rights for Homeless Students

Honorable Chair Hudson, Vice Chairs Dobson and McIntire, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Mary Ferrell and I am the founder an Executive Director of Maslow Project. Before founding this nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting homeless students and their families, I served for over a decade as a McKinney-Vento liaison for Medford School District. For a quarter century now, I have looked into the eyes of children who didn't know where they would sleep that night—yet still showed up to school.

I am here today to urge your support for House Bill 4149, legislation that is not merely important—it is absolutely non-negotiable for the future of Oregon's most vulnerable children.

I have held the hands of kindergarteners who carried all their belongings in a garbage bag. I have watched teenagers work overnight shifts to help pay for motel rooms, then fall asleep in class. I have seen the raw determination of children who walk miles to stay at their school of origin because it is the only stable thing in their chaotic world. And I have celebrated graduations that seemed impossible just months before—triumphs achieved because federal protections gave these students a fighting chance.

House Bill 4149 will ensure those protections continue regardless of what happens at the federal level.

The Crisis Before Us

Right now, 22,072 Oregon K-12 students are experiencing homelessness—4% of our entire student population. These are not statistics. They are children sitting in classrooms across our state, carrying trauma and uncertainty that no child should bear.

An estimated 6,357 infants and toddlers are homeless in Oregon, their critical early development years stolen by housing instability. Only 17.8% are enrolled in early childhood programs that could mitigate the devastating impacts.

In Jackson County, where I serve, 1,770 students experienced homelessness during the 2023-24 school year—the 4th highest number in Oregon despite being only the 6th largest county by population. I know many of these children by name. I know their struggles, their resilience, and their dreams.

School is Not Optional—It is Survival

For homeless children, school is not just about reading and math. It is their sanctuary. Their source of food. Their connection to adults who see them, believe in them, and refuse to give up on them.

School is where a nurse notices the infected cut. Where a counselor recognizes signs of depression. Where a teacher becomes the stable adult relationship that changes the trajectory of a life. Where breakfast and lunch might be the only reliable meals of the day.

I have watched schools become the connective tissue linking homeless families to housing assistance, healthcare, mental health services, and community supports. Without educational stability, these children fall through every crack in every system. With it, they have hope.

The Devastating Cost of Inaction

The data tells a story I've witnessed firsthand for 25 years:

- 62.3% chronic absenteeism rate among homeless students compared to 43.3% for all students
- Only 50.7% graduate high school compared to 81.3% of their housed peers
- Only 17.8% of homeless infants and toddlers enrolled in early childhood programs when early intervention matters most

When homeless students lose educational continuity, they lose everything. They fall behind academically and never catch up. They disconnect from the one institution that offered stability. They become tomorrow's chronically homeless adults, perpetuating cycles of poverty, trauma, and instability into the next generation.

I have seen this happen. And I have seen it prevented when the right supports are in place.

Why State Legislation is Critical Now

For 25 years, I have relied on McKinney-Vento federal protections to serve homeless students. But federal policy is precarious and subject to political winds beyond our control.

We cannot—we must not—gamble with our most vulnerable children's futures.

House Bill 4149 codifies these essential protections at the state level, ensuring that regardless of federal policy changes, Oregon will stand with homeless children and guarantee their right to education is inviolable.

Oregon has the opportunity to lead the nation. We can demonstrate that we value all children, regardless of their housing status. We can declare that educational stability for homeless students is a core Oregon value, not dependent on whoever controls Congress.

This is a Win for All of Oregon

Supporting House Bill 4149 is not charity—it is one of the smartest investments Oregon can make. Every student who stays in school and graduates represents:

- Reduced costs in emergency services, juvenile justice, and adult homelessness systems
- Increased tax revenue from employed, housed, productive citizens
- Stronger communities with educated residents who contribute rather than struggle
- Broken cycles of intergenerational poverty and homelessness
- Lives saved—literally—from the despair and danger of chronic homelessness

I have seen what happens when we get this right. I've watched students go from sleeping in cars to earning college degrees. I've seen children who aged out of foster care into homelessness become stable parents breaking the cycle for their own children.

Every single one of these success stories began with educational stability.

This is Non-Negotiable

Let me be absolutely clear: protecting the educational rights of homeless students is not a political issue. It is not a budget consideration to be weighed against other priorities. It is a moral imperative and an economic necessity that will define what kind of state Oregon chooses to be.

These children are watching us. They are waiting to see if adults will fight for them the way they fight every single day just to survive.

My Ask:

I have devoted my career—25 years as a liaison and now as an executive director—to ensuring homeless students can access education. I am asking you, imploring you, to pass House Bill 4149.

Protect these children. Invest in Oregon's future. Ensure that the work continues regardless of federal policy changes.

Our students deserve nothing less than our absolute commitment. Oregon deserves nothing less than leaders who recognize that protecting vulnerable children is not just good policy—it is who we must be.

House Bill 4149 is that commitment, codified.

I urge your unanimous support.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Ferrell

Executive Director, Maslow Project

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“I've spent 25 years watching children fight for an education while fighting for survival. Now it's our turn to fight for them.”