



LANE EDUCATION SERVICE DISTRICT

1200 Highway 99 North
Eugene, OR 97402

541.461.8200
541.461.8298 [Fax]

www.lesd.k12.or.us

EQUITY COMMITMENT LEADERSHIP COLLABORATION INTEGRITY

March 26, 2015

Dear Lane County Legislators,

We deeply appreciate your ongoing support and advocacy for public education over the years. Speaking with one voice, we, the superintendents of every school district in Lane County, are asking you now to step up once again to support Oregon's students by challenging the woefully inadequate proposed K–12 school funding level for the 2015–17 biennium.

A week ago we sent you a letter expressing our concerns about the \$7.235 billion state school funding level that had been proposed. This week, a marginally higher figure of \$7.255 billion is being discussed. The issues and concerns we raised last week still fully apply.

Neither \$7.235 billion nor the barely higher \$7.255 billion proposed funding level is adequate for Oregon's schools or reasonable for our students. The amount of funding in the co-chairs' budget proposal, stretched to provide full-day programs for kindergarten students, will unavoidably diminish services for our students over the biennium. This is a substantial setback for Oregon schools.

The clear fact is that, in spite of the Legislature's articulated concern, our state has not been and is not now prioritizing education.

We know that you care deeply about the quality of education Oregon students receive, and that you are not alone. We hear Oregon legislators from all regions and of all political persuasions profess that education is a priority. But the numbers tell a different tale. Since 2003–05 state spending overall has increased by 53%. Public safety spending is up 69%; human service spending has risen even more, 84%. Yet state funding for K–12 education has grown far less, just 35%. The co-chairs' proposal would continue this trend of underfunding education compared with other state spending. It would once again reduce the portion of the state's budget dedicated to K–12 schools—at the same time that Oregon school districts are implementing full-day kindergarten and stretching that funding to serve the equivalent of 28,000 more students.

We are dismayed by the proposed funding level and the impacts it will have on Lane County schools. Moreover, we are deeply concerned about some specific elements in the proposed budget estimates issued on March 23.

First, the total amount is simply inadequate to add full-day kindergarten without taking resources away from students in the other grades. The proposed \$7.255 billion funding level would require even more cuts on top of the toll already taken by years of underfunding, although those cuts would mostly come in the second year of the biennium. We all see and feel, every day, the damage this defunding of schools has caused. Oregon already ranks near the bottom of every national comparison, from inputs such as instructional time and class size to resulting outcomes such as graduation rates. Requiring further cuts, in what are already severely reduced services to our students, would be unconscionable.

Second, the budget is based on a 50–50 split between the years in the biennium instead of the normal 49–51 split that would account for rising operating costs over the biennium. This approach was used two biennia ago, as a drastic measure applied during the worst recession in recent history, and the results were so damaging that we heard promises from legislators that they would never propose or approve a 50–50 split again. Yet here we are, seeing the same proposal resurrected in an attempt to postpone the proposed budget cuts to schools. In actuality, this approach would just guarantee at least two years of budget cuts. It would still force many school districts to make cuts in the first year and would push deeper cuts to the second year. It also would set us up for more years

of underfunding to come, as the lower 50% funding level in 2016–17 would provide a lower base for building the education budget for the 2017–19 biennium.

Third, the estimates are based on ambitiously hopeful, even risky, estimates of collections and revenue growth. In 2013-14 only five counties were able to achieve a collection rate of 95%, and no county achieved a collection rate of 96%. The projected revenue growth of 4.5% built into the budget proposal also exceeds expectations. If these projections are not realized, revenues to our districts will be millions of dollars lower than the Legislative Revenue Office projects. Local districts will incur the consequences of higher than realistic estimates because our revenues will fall short and the state will not make up the difference. Relying on these highly optimistic estimates is rolling the dice on our students' education—it's our students who will pay the price in the likely event this turns out to be a bad bet.

In Lane County school districts, if this proposed budget is approved by the Legislature, we will need to begin a difficult conversation with our boards, our budget committees, our employees and our community members about where to make painful cuts. There is no easy answer—our budgets have already been laid bare by the deprivations of Measure 5 and 50 and then cut to the bone by the impacts of the Great Recession.

Since the recession began, our schools and our students have suffered from deep cuts. We've lost a significant percent of our staff. Our class sizes have risen. Our students and staff have lost numerous days of teaching and learning to budget-reducing furlough days. In many districts, our current fifth graders have never had a full school year even by Oregon's low standard. This means we have had students complete their entire elementary school experience without a single full year of education—at a time when we are trying to improve student graduation rates. We have made reductions in programs that keep students engaged in school, from athletics to career technical education to music. Our staff have sacrificed compensation year after year, giving up salary increases and seeing their paychecks cut by the reductions of furlough days at the same time that state mandates are requiring much more of them, with severe effects on morale.

This past year we began to recover, thanks to the Legislature's decision to reinvest some funding in education. Many districts were able to restore a full or nearly full-length school year and provide some targeted class size reduction, bringing most elementary class sizes under thirty—still six students per class higher than the national average. The proposed budget for 2015–17 would reverse those gains.

There is no good or easy way for our schools to weather the compromises the budget presents to us. Will we lay off yet more of our newest, most diverse and talented teachers and further increase class sizes? Will we once again cut school days and give our students even less time for learning? Will we make even more cuts in programs that provide a well-rounded education and keep students engaged in school? And how will we explain to our community, as we talk about how we will provide a lesser education for their kids, why the Legislature decided schools must make such cuts in a time of expected growth in state revenue?

Oregon is not in crisis. The economy is improving. Revenues have increased, and spending on other important state services is proposed to increase in turn. Yet despite the voiced support for schools, our state's investment in education continues to lag behind other increases. It is unacceptable that, in a time of economic growth, the proposed budget would force schools to cut services to our students yet again.

Schools in Oregon need at least \$7.5 billion to add full-day kindergarten and remain stable with current programs and class sizes. Anything less is another unsustainable cut to our schools in Lane County and across Oregon.

We ask you to vote NO on the budget and hold out for a plan that guarantees at least \$7.5 billion for schools is fully articulated and put forward for approval—a plan that maintains the 49–51 split between the two years of the biennium, and reflects reasonable estimates of collections and growth. This would ensure schools can at least maintain the already insufficient level of services we are currently providing to our students.

Please stand up for students and ask your colleagues in the Legislature to join you. We know how difficult this is when our legislative leadership is also asking for your support. This is a critical time to demonstrate that we can turn the corner and truly invest in education.

Lane County Superintendents have not written to you in this way in previous biennia. We understood the economic crisis facing the state. We believed you were doing your best to protect our children. Now that we are in recovery we just cannot understand how education could be allocated less than its proportionate share of the budget. Please invest some of the growing revenue in our students. It will pay off for Oregon's future.

Thank you for your time, your attention, your caring, and your willingness to take a stand. We know we can count on you to support a reasonable path that protects our students and our schools and helps to move us forward.

Sincerely,

Ethel Angal
Superintendent
Siuslaw School District

Walt Hanline
Superintendent
Lowell School District

Tony Scurto
Superintendent
Pleasant Hill School District

Sheldon Berman
Superintendent
Eugene School District 4J

Don Kordosky
Superintendent
Oakridge School District

Sally Storm
Superintendent
Fern Ridge School District

James Brookins
Superintendent
Blachly School District

Hertica Martin
Superintendent
Springfield Public Schools

Larry Sullivan
Superintendent
Lane Education Service District

Aaron Brown
Superintendent
Crow-Applegate-Lorane School District

Jodi O'Mara
Superintendent
Mapleton School District

Jim Thomas
Superintendent
McKenzie School District

Colt Gill
Superintendent
Bethel School District

Krista Parent
Superintendent
South Lane School District

Bill Watkins
Superintendent
Marcola School District

Todd Hamilton
Superintendent
Creswell School District

Kathleen Rodden-Nord
Superintendent
Junction City School District