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March 3, 2017

Dear House Committee on Education:

Rep Margaret Doherty, Chair

Rep. Diego Hernandez, Vice-Chair

Rep. Carl Wilson, Vice Chair

Rep. Paul Evans

Rep. Susan McLain

Rep. Julie Parrish

Rep. Janeen Sollman

Rep. Sherrie Sprenger

Rep. A. Richard Vial

The purpose of this letter is to voice opposition to HB 2720. My name is Dr. David Gray and I am in my 4th year as Executive Director of the Metro East Web Academy, a public charter school in Gresham-Barlow School District in it's 8th year of operation. The school has grown from the initial 70 students in 2009 to almost 500 students in 2015-2016 school year. The school opened the 2016-2017 school year with over 420 students and expect to hit the 500 enrollment again. I have served in traditional public education for over 30 years as a state department executive, superintendent, assistant superintendent, National Blue Ribbon School Principal, and a state and nationally recognized teacher. I share your passion for public education.

Unfortunately, the traditional education system is broken. I have worked to fix this system and that is the main rationale for my departure from traditional systems to the virtual charter experience. Traditional systems are effective for some students but not all and many of those succeed in spite of the good intentions of professional educators. This is why we must not limit options for students. Metro East Web Academy and many other charter schools exist to provide options to students.

Although HB 2720's purpose seems innocuous as some would perceive it to just be a study; it is actually one more study to examine a system of virtual schools that have been studied over and over throughout the United States. In fact, the study purports to use the same data points that are readily available on the ODE website, which will undoubtedly include metrics such as graduation rates, state assessment results, and attendance data. I can not think of a bigger waste of taxpayer dollars, especially in a year when resources are scarce and legislators are scrambling to create an adequate educational budget. I wonder how the public would perceive this type of wasteful spending? I also wonder why we just do not ask the schools for the additional data points?

We want to thank Rep. McLain for creating an inclusive process that allowed the virtual school leaders to meet with her and discuss this legislation. As it turns out, the language added to the legislation after our collaborative process, reverts the bill back to the additional option of studying data that already exists in abundance. So the question, is why do we need to do a study when we have readily available data in existence in various forms?

Our schools exist for a reason. We offer an opportunity for many students to recoup credits in a non-traditional environment as a large percentage come to us credit deficient and at-risk of dropping out of school. In fact, during the 2016/2017 school year, 73% of our students who have enrolled in our online program, are behind in credits. Of those students, 36% are more than a year behind in credits.

Many of our students' report to us that the reason they choose to attend our hybrid virtual school, is that they want to "get out of overcrowded schools and classrooms", or that they have been "bullied and are looking for a safer environment", or that they are "bored and want to move faster" and are restrained from doing so with traditional school methods. We currently have almost four hundred and fifty students. Last spring, we graduated 125 students with either a diploma or GED. Some of these graduates were 5th and 6th year seniors. This year, we hope to graduate as many. Many of these students would not have graduated at their neighborhood high school.

Lastly and most importantly, most of our virtual schools are evaluated annually, which is in addition to anything our traditional brick and mortar schools experience. In our case, Portland State University evaluates our school annually and provides much of the data that this proposed legislation purports to study. I would be happy to provide the committee copies of the PSU evaluation and our data dashboard upon request.

Ultimately, if it is important to study virtual schools – why don't we do a study on all of our high schools to determine why students are leaving traditional high schools and coming to charter schools? Why are there so many at-risk students? Do traditional brick and mortar schools add value to a student's education? Do we know the answers to these questions?

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you are interested, here is the link to one student's story: https://youtu.be/e_DyePN1Z6w

Respectfully,

David L. Gray, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Metro East Web Academy