

## To all who care about public education in Oregon,

Through partnership and commitment, Salem-Keizer Public Schools reached a tentative agreement on a new two-year teacher contract. We thank both parties for their dedication and for narrowly avoiding a teacher strike. And with this important matter behind us, we must address a more urgent issue: “How do we, as a state, fix public school funding and improve the day-to-day lives of educators and students? How do we address the conditions that make teachers feel that striking is necessary?”

We need teaching to be sustainable and fulfilling. We need safe schools. We need community solutions for community problems like mental and behavioral health. With the help of our lawmakers in 2025, Oregon can be a national model, a state that proves that schools and student well-being are a priority.

There are three concrete actions for which we can all advocate.

First, Oregon needs an accurate method of answering the question, “How much do schools we already have cost to maintain?” In early 2023, the state projected that school personnel costs would increase by 5.45% over two years; this has proven wildly inaccurate. Salem-Keizer Public Schools’ personnel costs will increase by over 14%. Due in part to a broken and discredited method for estimating future costs, Salem-Keizer will announce the loss of hundreds of positions in the coming weeks.

Second, Oregon must fix the indefensible 11% special education funding cap. 2022 data show that 90% of Oregon districts exceed this cap. The state average is 14.5%, and Salem-Keizer’s rate is over 17%. Oregon schools serve all students, but the state funding formula neatly sidesteps economic responsibility for the number and nature of the special education services Oregon schools provide.

Third, we need systemic solutions to the escalating youth mental and behavioral health crisis. We are schools and not medical facilities, so we are staffed with educators and not clinicians. Our committed staff are attempting to fill in this gap without the training, time, or facilities to do so. Our students need expanded access to clinical services and schools need the flexibility to use federal funding to pay for those services.

Oregon districts are struggling to hold the financially and educationally unsustainable conditions at bay. Schools serve everyone. And as Oregon’s school systems begin to stagger under an ever-accumulating weight, catching them is everyone’s responsibility.

— Salem-Keizer Public Schools Board of Directors

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