I am Darla Meeuwsen and I am the Executive Director for Sauvie Island Academy. We are a K-8 Place-based public charter school located just outside of Portland, sponsored by the Scappoose School District.

Before coming here today, I spent a lot of time thinking about and looking at the Oregon Constitution and the US Constitution!

Perhaps, it is all those days as a Social Studies teacher!

I truly believe in the ideals of Democracy, Equality and the need for a Public Education System that provides choices and opportunities for all.

**This is what brings me here today!**

Did you know ARTICLE VIII of the Oregon Constitution states, “The Legislative Assembly shall provide by law for the establishment of a uniform, and general system of Common schools.”

The phrase “system of Common schools” demonstrates that our founders realized that not all public schools would be the same, but they would have a “common” goal.

This is why in the State of Oregon we provide students with choices. Students have the choice of their neighborhood school, magnet schools, open enrollment, online schools and charter schools.

**No longer is our approach to education that it is a one size fits all model.**

**Now students have the right to choose a Common school that works best for them.**

This is the “system of Common schools” our founders envisioned.

The Oregon Constitution also recognizes the need for a funding system for this “system of Common schools.” It states, “Provisions shall be made by law for the distribution of the income of the common school fund among the several Counties of this state **in proportion** to the number of children resident therein between the ages, four and twenty years.”

As the Task Force on School Funding, it is your job to ensure that the state school funds are **in proportion for all children who attend public schools**.

I challenge you to look at the current common school system to see if we are following the Constitution.

Why do students who choose to attend Public Charter Schools only receive 80% of their State School Funds?

Is it because they are only 4/5 of a person?

In 1789, when we drafted the US Constitution, we stated that a black person was only worth 3/5 or 60% of a person, when it came to determining how many representative each state would receive.

We justified this as a Nation, because we viewed them as “different.” Their skin color was different. Their hair was different. They sang different songs and ate different foods. Therefore, it was OK to only recognize them as 3/5 of a person.

How is this different than how the State of Oregon views Public Charter Schools?

Public Charter Schools are meant to be different. At my public charter school we use a Place-based approach to learning. We purposely try to bridge the classrooms and community. We purposely partner with the community, in order to teach the curriculum through a sense of place.

However, the State School Funding System has set up the practice of treating a student who chooses the public charter school option is 4/5 or 80% of a student.

Whereas a student who chooses to attend their traditional neighborhood school is treated as a whole student and receives the full 100% of their State School funding. In fact, the State of Oregon has created a system of Open Enrollment, which allows a student to choose a school outside of their district and still receive 100% of their funding.

In 1789, these students would have been the “whites” of our society, because they were recognized by the nation as 100% of a person. This discrimination lasted until the Emancipation Proclamation.

I am here today to argue that the Common State School Funding system has taken us backwards. It is set up to discriminate against those students who choose to attend Public Charter Schools. The system creates inequity for kids, by recognizing some of them as being worth 4/5 or 80% and others as 100%.

In either situation, these are both students attending a public school. In both cases, they are making a choice to pick a school which is the best fit for them. Don’t we want students to pick the school that is going to give them the best chance to be successful?

As a State we talk about the importance of attendance. Doesn’t having the choice to pick the best school for your style of learning, help kids to want to come to school?

As a State we are concerned about our graduation rates? If students are attending, engaged, challenged won’t this keep them in school? Doesn’t this help students to graduate?

The answer is Yes!

We all know that students that have more access to resources do better. Students that have more opportunities are more likely to be successful. Then why then does the State Funding System discriminate against the student who chooses the public charter school by taking away funding, ultimately taking away resources and decreasing their opportunities?

Why is the funding system set up so that sponsoring school districts of public charter school are allowed to keep 20% of the charter school students funds?

Better question yet, is it equitable that they are then able to take this 20% and use if for the students attending the other schools in their district?

So let’s look at how this works:

Student A is a 3rd grader who lives in Scappoose and chooses to attend Sauvie Island Academy, a public charter school. They are considered 4/5 of a person and funded at 80%. They must give up 20% of their funding, their resources, and their opportunities because of this decision. They are attending a public school.

Student B is a 3rd grader who also lives in Scappoose and chooses to attend Grant Watts Elementary also a public school. They are considered a whole person and receive 100% of their funding, their resources and their opportunity. But actually they are receiving more than 100% because the Scappoose School District is allowed under ORS to keep the 20% from Student A and use it to provide additional funding, resources and opportunities for Student B.

Who has more opportunity? Who has access to more resources? Who has more funding?

Is this Funding System for public education equitable for all students?

Isn’t the purpose of public education to create a level playing field and give all student the same access to resources and opportunities?

How is this not discrimination against the student who is forced to receive less (the 80%) because they chose the option that best met their educational needs, they chose the public charter school.

Help me understand this:

Both students are attending public schools.

Both students have the right to choose.

Both students want equal opportunities to be successful.

Yet according to the current ORS and the current State School Funding System, one student receives 80% and the other receives 100% and then some.

This is the problem that you the Task Force needs to address in the State School Funding System!

I would like the task force to ask themselves if funding in Oregon is equitable. I would argue it is NOT!

Some would like you to believe that “public charter schools” should receive less than all other Common schools in the State of Oregon, because and I quote “Charter Schools can do whatever they want.” Or better yet, I am often told we should get less, because Public Charter Schools “do not have to do what the “regular” public school have to do.”

**This is simply not accurate!** But these types of statements and beliefs help to justify the discrimination and inequity that our public school funding has created.

As a public charter school:

* I cannot pick and choose who can come to the public charter school.
* I cannot charge tuition, like a private school.
* I cannot kick kids out, simply because I want to or because they miss behave.
* I must assess the students with the same system as all public schools. Yes, our students have to take the State OAKS Test.
* I cannot tell a student that they cannot attend the public charter because they have special needs. Yes, I have kids on IEPs and 504s.
* Yes I have ELL students and yes I have to have an ELL plan approved by the ODE.
* No I can’t spend the monies however I want, I have to have a fiscal audit each year just like any other public school and yes I have to submit it to ODE.
* I love this one. You can hire anyone you want to teach. Although ORS 338 allows us to have 50% of our teaching staff be non-licensed, it isn’t something I recommend because it will put your sponsoring district on a Title IIA plan for the next 4 years. This is not how you maintain a good working relationship with your district. All of my teachers are highly qualified. Worse yet they start at $34,000 with no dental, no vision, no tuition reimbursement, and only 80% of the resources.
* It doesn’t matter if your kids actually learn anything. Well actually as a public charter we must show growth for all students or risk losing our charter. Districts like to use this phrase, “The charter school students will perform the same or better than the district or the state.” If any other public school didn’t show growth they simply become a Focus School and get additional funding and support to improve. This is definitely not the case for public charter schools.
* Well you don’t have to file those awful State Reports. I hate to tell you but yes we do and we don’t have an entire district office staff to help us. I spend hours as a public charter school director filing State Reports there is the IUID, Staff Assignment, Staff Position, and the list goes on.
* Well you as a charter school don’t have the overhead. What we don’t have is the infrastructure that the other public schools have. For example, we as a charter school must create, maintain and pay for all the systems needed to run a district. This means we need administration (which must be licensed), human resources, accounts payable and receivable, payroll, curriculum, technology, transportation, etc. I am the district office! We rely on the local ESD’s to provide these services and systems at a subsidized cost so that we can afford to be a school.
* You get to use the public school buildings for free or better yet I heard you only have to pay $1 in rent. This is so far from the truth. We pay $35,000 to lease a public school building and we are a public school. Our school was paid for by tax dollars. We don’t even get to control our own heat and we pay for it. We are tasked with the care and maintenance of the facility. Nothing is for free.
* We must have our Board, our own Policies, and our own Pace Insurance. I could go on all day with how public charter schools are really no different than any other public school. We simply “look different,” our approaches are different, so we are “treated different.”

I challenge you to have the courage of Abraham Lincoln to fix a system that discriminates. This is your opportunity to fix the funding system which is broken.

Without a fix to the State School Funding system students who choose public charter schools, will continue to be discriminated against through the unequitable funding system.

You may be sitting there asking yourself how much impact does 20% really have on students and public charter schools?

On paper 20% really doesn’t seem like much, but the reality is that 20% for my charter school students equates to $1300 less per year.

Did you know that with $1300 dollars you can by:

726 boxes of crayola crayons

Or 342 bottles of paint

Or 130 scientific caculators

Or 50 cases of copy paper

Or 5 Ipads

Do you realize that is Student A attended Sauvie Island Academy from Kindergarten through 8th grade; they will receive over $11,000 less than Student B who attends Grant Watts Elementary.

Why is one student’s public education worth $11,000 less than another?

Now you may be thinking well that is only one student, it really isn’t that big of a deal. For Sauvie Island Academy students 20% less comes to a total of $337,000 less a year in funding for our students. Instead, these funds are given to the Scappoose School District and to the students who choose to attend their neighborhood schools or who have enrolled through the Open enrollment system.

These means the students at Sauvie Island Academy will have less funding, less resources and less opportunities than the other Common schools in our state!

Are you OK with a system that creates and maintains inequities?

Unless you do something through this task force, the answer is YES!

Student who choose their neighborhood schools- receive more funding. We all know more funding means more resources and more resources means more opportunities.

Students who choose to use the open enrollment option- receive more funding. Again, we all know more funding means more resources and more resources means more opportunities.

Students who choose to a public charter school – receive less funding. Less funding, means less resources, which means less opportunities.

Isn’t the goal of public education to support all students?

Isn’t the goal to give all students access to the resources?

Don’t we want a system that provides for choice and creates equity in resources so all students have the opportunity to be successful?

Why is it that we have a state school funding system creating inequity for students who choose public charter schools?

The solution is simply, but definitely not liked by those receiving the extra 20%.

The solution is to treat public charter school students the same as open enrollment students.

Allow the funds for a public charter school student to flow through to the charter at 100%, just as they do for a student who chooses the open enrollment option.

I ask that you eliminate the inequity and the discrimination Public Charter School Students face with the current State School Funding Sytem.

I appreciate the time to speak with you today.

Thank you,