May 7, 2012

Dear Gov. Kitzhaber and members of the Oregon Education Investment Board:

Thank you for the opportunity to put my comments into the public record. I regret that work commitments prevent me from traveling to Salem to deliver these remarks in person.

I write as a local school board member, and as a concerned Oregon voter, to urge you to be true to the "Investment" part of your name. Please become a champion for funding reform. Accountability goes both ways, and you are failing to be accountable for this state's disinvestment in its children.

I fully understand that funding alone will not solve our state's problems – we need to tackle PERS reform, battle rising health care costs, improve teacher quality, close the achievement gap, and much more at both the state and local levels. But to focus solely on school district "accountability," as you appear to be doing, with zero focus on the funding side of the equation, is outrageous and unacceptable.

There is no way that this state can reach your ambitious and laudable 40-40-20 goal without tax and funding reform – without actual "Investment" in Oregon education.

I deeply appreciate that the Achievement Compacts include the Quality Education Model (QEM) level of funding number for each district. Yet you are ignoring the QEM, and I hear that many legislators "don't believe in the QEM."

I don't believe in Measure 5 and Measure 11 – but like the QEM, they are in the State Constitution, and I have to abide by them every day. It is appalling that legislators are picking and choosing which parts of the Constitution they will adhere to.

What's not to "believe" about the QEM? Are you even talking about it? Have you even looked at the most recent recommendations in the Quality Education Commission's report? There is nothing extravagant in the QEM – it contains common-sense goals for schools like reasonable class sizes, sufficient FTE to provide enrichments like library, PE and art, and up-to-date curriculum. It's a research-based, best-practices guideline for what every Oregon student needs and deserves. Why on earth are you not pursuing it on behalf of our students?

My fear is that school districts will be caught in a cruel catch-22: should we, through extraordinary effort, manage to eke out achievement gains despite the current inadequate level of funding, the claim from Salem will be that we "don't need" additional funding. On the other hand, should Oregon school districts, with our shortened school years, large class sizes, reduced enrichments, and overworked teachers and principals, fail to make the achievement gains you demand, we'll be told we don't "deserve" additional funding.

If you truly believed in your mission as the Oregon Education ***Investment*** Board, you would be championing the QEM and charting a pathway forward for how we as a state can fund education and essential public services at the level Oregonians need and deserve. There's no reason we can't do this along with working on PERS, health care, teacher quality, and all the other issues as well. Our state is in crisis and we need to address all aspects of this enormously complex challenge. Please become a champion for tax and funding reform and acknowledge the reality that our kids cannot thrive in the current funding environment. Please invest in Oregon kids.

Sincerely,

Ruth Adkins
Portland, Oregon