

Dear Committee Members,

My name is Fayla Sutton. I am a resident of Portland and currently the Director of Programs for Our Place Portland, a community non-profit that supports the overall health of families through youth development and family advocacy services. I am writing to you in support of LD 1624, an act to provide funding for summer school programming.

Our Place supports 55 youth from 23 families through afterschool youth programming, community summer camp, and family advocacy services. All of the families we serve live in subsidized housing, identify as immigrants and over 60% of the youth we serve have identified disabilities and have IEP (Independent Education Plans) at school. Much of our family advocacy focuses on supporting youth and families in communicating with schools and ensuring youth can access resources to help them succeed in school. We offer opportunities for social-emotional learning, novel experiences, and academic support.

In my career, I have worked at or with several other youth development organizations. I have offered academic support to elementary through college students. Many parents were worried about learning loss in the summer, lacked access to affordable tutoring options, or their children were habitually truant from school. The need became so great that after a summer of tutoring youth, I initiated a partnership with The USM Department of Education to offer tutoring to 15 students from elementary to high school. Youth are more interested in reading for fun and are more confident in school. Parents have reported that students' grades are improving in the subjects they receive tutoring in.

Summer school funding is essential. Last summer parents we serve asked Our Place staff to offer academic tutoring to their children, mainly elementary students, to prevent learning loss and strengthen foundational skills. After seeing the need, we initiated a tutoring program. There are no low-cost tutoring programs for young students in the Portland area, resulting in learning challenges for students from families that lack resources and need extra support. Exacerbating the achievement gap can affect the opportunities students can engage in later in life.

Truancy leads to a need for summer school. Truancy can stem from many issues, including disengagement from school, life changes, bullying, and perceived or actual mistreatment from school staff. For disengaged youth, summer school offers a new perspective on learning to help them reengage in their education. For youth experiencing life changes, summer school is stable and routine. Students who avoid school due to bullying may attend summer school with different students. For all students, but especially those who may have been truant due to mistreatment, summer school is an opportunity to receive more individualized support with academic subjects. We serve several families whose middle and high-school-aged children are habitually truant. In the past, I have worked with many. I have seen students who have disengaged all year attend summer school and reignite their interest in their education. This led to further gains, with one student I had worked with gaining so much confidence from engaging in summer school, that they joined extracurricular activities in the fall and began to grow their social circle.

Another family we work with has two habitually truant students. The older high school student has been truant for almost the entirety of their high school career. Due to the credits they have earned in summer school, they have progressed in their education. They say they are more engaged in summer school because they work more closely with a teacher they like. Their middle school-aged sibling has been truant for almost a year now after the family had to move suddenly to another district due to unsafe housing conditions. This student has an IEP and was supported well in their previous school. In their new program, they felt disempowered and misunderstood. Now, after forging new friendships with students and relationships with staff, they attend school regularly. Engagement in summer school will be integral for this student, not only to gain missing credits but to ensure there are no learning gaps, so when they enter high school, they begin the year feeling confident in their abilities.

In one of my previous roles, I worked with recent high school graduates to help them navigate secondary education and explore job opportunities. I worked with several students who did not know basic grammar and writing skills and some who did not know how to read. Ensuring students have access to summer school would mean that all students would have these integral foundational skills. To a student, this can be incredibly disheartening; to an employer or an educational institution, the lack of these skills can result in rejection. Students have graduated from the public school system without the minimum basic skills needed to thrive in their adult lives. These outcomes prove that we are failing our youth.

A reality of serving youth who come from families living near or below the poverty line is that many caretakers are working multiple jobs or long hours. These circumstances alone can be a detriment for youth academically. Youth from families with more resources may have jobs that allow them to be home to help their children with school work, whereas youth with caregivers who have to work more may not have an adult available to help with homework. Additionally, a disproportionate number of immigrant and refugee families live at or below the poverty line. These factors combined with caregivers who may not know English, mean that students cannot receive academic support at home. These are the same families that struggle to afford tutoring services. In offering equitable solutions for students, summer school can be an equalizer that provides youth with the skills they need to ensure no doors are closed to them as they pursue their passions.

I have dedicated my life to fighting for equity for all; one of the strongest factors for creating more equitable outcomes is access to quality education. Education gives people the knowledge to discover and pursue their dreams. It can open doors and create opportunities for upward mobility. Summer school is an integral part of an equitable educational system as it allows alternative learning opportunities to support students. For these reasons, I support LD 1624. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions from the committee.

Sincerely,
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