

## WHAT CHANGED FOR STUDENTS, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES?

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When Oregon's Student Success Act (SSA) passed in 2019, it kindled hopes that new public education investments and improvements would make a lasting difference in children's lives. Five years later, when Foundations for a Better Oregon set out to examine the SSA's early impacts on K-12 education, our research focused primarily on what has changed for children, schools, and communities.

By design, the SSA affects every school and community differently; its impact cannot be defined by any individual or universal change. Documenting change over the last five years was further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges families, schools, and communities have faced since 2019. Nevertheless, this analysis identifies emerging patterns, highlights encouraging trends, and flags opportunities for improvement.

As we look back for signs of progress, Oregon is still grappling with the fact that important student outcomes—such as reading and math proficiency—were well below state benchmarks before 2020 and haven't rebounded since the pandemic. Unacceptable academic disparities persist, and as in many other states, schools are struggling with chronic absenteeism and increased student mental health needs. Making sustainable progress requires keeping these metrics clearly in sight while also contending with the complexity and pace of large-scale systems change.

# STRONG FIRST STEPS

In fall 2019, school districts and communities enthusiastically welcomed the SSA. This excitement fueled a dedicated state and local effort to implement the extensive new law collaboratively. Although these efforts spanned all SSA initiatives across early learning and K–12 education, this analysis mainly focuses on two of the most significant K–12 investments: [the Student Investment Account and the High School Success Initiative](#).

## BUILDING AN IMPLEMENTATION TEAM

Almost immediately after the SSA’s passage, the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) began designing and hiring new staff positions funded through the law. To coordinate SSA implementation, ODE established the Office of Education Innovation and Improvement, which was led by a new assistant superintendent and a team of education systems change practitioners. To facilitate cross-program collaboration, ODE integrated federal school improvement programs and the High School Success Initiative under the umbrella of this new office.

During this time, ODE also partnered with Oregon’s 19 education service districts (ESDs) to create a network of regional liaisons charged with helping local school districts prepare for SSA implementation. With the support of these liaisons, school districts were better able to understand the new law and to determine how new funding and requirements would fit into their existing planning and budgeting processes.



These roles and structures were designed to strengthen state, regional, and local collaboration and communication, which proved invaluable when the pandemic emerged. The new personnel and partnerships supported the K–12 system’s early crisis response, quickly demonstrating the value of SSA implementation.

## CENTERING EQUITY THROUGH IMPLEMENTATION

One of the SSA’s key goals is to create a more equitable and inclusive public education system—one that supports the well-being of all students, especially those historically underserved by Oregon schools. This commitment is embedded in the law’s goals and requirements, and it ripples out across school districts through processes and practices that promote inclusive decision-making and equitable investments.

For instance, the SSA’s Student Investment Account (SIA), a major new funding stream for improving K–12 academic and health outcomes, requires local investments to focus on reducing academic disparities for “focal student groups” who have been historically underserved by

public schools. The Oregon Legislature originally specified six focal student groups in legislation—including economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities—and gave the State Board of Education regulatory authority to designate additional groups.

This focus on investing in historically underserved students follows the “targeted universalism” framework developed by legal scholar john a. powell, which posits that reaching a universal goal—such as high-quality public education access and outcomes for all students—requires targeted support and tailored strategies to meet the unique needs of specific groups.

“Applying targeted universalism provides an operational pathway to lead for educational change in a way that bridges relationships and perspectives while maintaining a dedicated and precise attention on focal students and their families.”

—Oregon Department of Education<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Oregon Department of Education. (2024, April 26). *Aligning for Student Success: Integrated Guidance Update 2025–27*.

The polarized political environment might suggest that Oregonians are more divided than united around the need for a more equitable and inclusive education system. In fact, [statewide opinion research](#) shows that very strong majorities agree that schools must focus on ending persistent academic disparities so every student has the same chance to succeed in school, no matter their background or circumstances.<sup>2</sup> More than two-thirds of Oregonians also believe targeted strategies to improve how schools support historically underserved students will create learning environments that better support all students.

To help achieve the SIA’s goals, ODE required every school district to adopt and use an equity lens to assess the possible impacts of decisions, policies, and practices on focal student groups. In addition, the agency made sure that school districts not only reviewed and understood disaggregated student data, but also made this data accessible to educators and community members to identify which student groups are not being well served at the local level.

ODE also strengthened long-standing requirements for school districts to consult formally with Oregon’s nine federally recognized tribes.<sup>3</sup> These requirements are meant to ensure that sovereign nations can meaningfully contribute their perspectives and expertise during local planning and decision-making for school districts that receive federal Title VI resources or where more than half of students are American Indian or Alaska Native. While these requirements alone do not guarantee inclusive processes and equitable investments, ODE set important baseline expectations for school districts while also sending a message that the state’s implementation strategy was serious about honoring the SSA’s commitment to equity.

## BEGINNING A REGULAR RITUAL OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The SSA’s emphasis on community engagement is rooted in the belief that public schools belong to their communities. That belief is backed by research indicating that authentic engagement is essential to improving outcomes for historically underserved students and families.<sup>4</sup> To fulfill this commitment, a new ritual has emerged: In the fall of every even-numbered year, the SSA requires school districts and charter schools to engage students, families, educators, and community members in discussions on how to invest and target SIA funds.

Before the SSA, 32 state and federal grant programs required school districts to conduct some form of community engagement. However, these programs often lacked clear expectations or mechanisms to ensure community engagement actually informed school districts’ plans and

investments. Engagement was often limited to surveys or one-off town hall meetings, and community members likely never heard how their feedback was integrated into school district plans (or even if it was actually considered).

In fall 2020, ODE published a [Community Engagement Toolkit](#) to help school districts meet—and even go beyond—the SIA’s community engagement requirements. This resource, which has been revised and improved with input from educators and community leaders, set initial expectations for authentic community engagement and provided best-practice guides, tools, and templates. Once again, ODE’s approach to SSA implementation showed the state was serious about building school districts’ capacity to meet both the spirit and the letter of the law’s community engagement requirements.

2 Oregon Values and Beliefs Center. (2024, September 26). [Oregon Education Priorities and Planning](#).

3 Oregon Department of Education. (2024). [Understanding the ESSA Law and How to Honor Educational Sovereignty: A Toolkit for Tribal Consultation](#). [Version 2.1].

4 Ross, E. M. (2023, March 21). [The Case for Strong Family and Community Engagement in Schools: A Roundup of the Latest K–12 Research Reveals Persuasive Evidence](#). Usable Knowledge. Harvard Graduate School of Education.



**SSA IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT**  
**HIGH DESERT EDUCATION SERVICE DISTRICT**



Foundations for a Better Oregon partnered with DHM Research to spotlight how High Desert ESD and school districts in Central Oregon met the SSA’s community engagement requirements with humility and creativity.

At the schools High Desert ESD serves, about 8% of students identify as nonwhite. Gathering authentic feedback about their specific needs is tricky, as one administrator puts it, “without making those families feel tokenized.” [...] Despite various hurdles, many school districts in the region have succeeded in reaching target community members by employing a person-first model.

Meeting the needs of marginalized students and families entails gathering their feedback in a way that diffuses power dynamics and stimulates open and honest conversation. As an example, High Desert ESD provided districts with community conversation facilitators who are unaffiliated with the district and who reflect the demographics of the families they assist. It also found that some groups are better served through one-on-one conversations, especially families experiencing houselessness or poverty. In this way, families can ask questions and make their needs clear in a supportive environment that minimizes fear of stigma.

The biggest surprise from these outreach efforts was the ESD’s realization that many community needs were relatively easy to implement. For instance, one school district serves three Native American tribes whose reservation is partly within its boundary. The district’s ability to provide essential information on topics like extracurricular eligibility to Native students and families has been invaluable to strengthening relationships and communication, and critical to becoming a trusted resource for a marginalized community in a white-dominant region. Continuing to build pipelines for community members to serve as facilitators or hold positions of power will further foster trust between districts and target populations.<sup>5</sup>



5 DHM Research. (2024, October). *Student Success Act Implementation Spotlight: High Desert Education Service District.*

# THE PANDEMIC DISRUPTION

On March 8, 2020—only months after the SSA became law—Oregon Governor Kate Brown issued the first of several executive orders responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic upheaval, school building closures, and health care shortages all profoundly impacted students, families, educators, and communities.

As school districts were preparing their first SIA applications, they suddenly faced a crisis. Schools were shifting gears to deliver meals, provide laptops and internet hotspots, and connect families to other essential resources. Within weeks, nearly every school district transitioned to distance learning, which eventually evolved into hybrid learning models. Students wouldn't fully return to in-person learning until a year later (and in some cases, not until fall 2021).

The pandemic forced districts to adapt and share information at an unprecedented pace. While this spurred innovation, it also exacerbated challenges. Educators faced immense pressure in a constantly shifting environment, and student learning was disrupted.

In August 2020, the Oregon Legislature held a special legislative session to address the economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Fearing an economic downturn, legislators shifted SSA revenue into the State School Fund, reducing SIA funding from \$500 million to \$150 million. They also directed ODE to freeze hiring for SSA-related staff positions and suspended requirements that school districts create five-year targets to improve academic outcomes and reduce disparities—a major SSA accountability measure.

With student health and safety becoming a top priority, many school districts amended their SIA-funded investments to address pressing new needs. Eventually, federal emergency relief funding infused \$1.7 billion into Oregon's K-12 system, further easing the strain.

Amid these challenges, education leaders found new ways to collaborate and support students. In many cases, districts that built strong community partnerships in the early days of SSA implementation were better equipped to respond to the pandemic and other crises such as wildfires. The regional network of SSA liaisons also shifted from assisting school districts with SSA implementation toward helping them understand new public health regulations and coordinate pandemic response.

Although SSA resources and partnerships helped districts weather the storm, the pandemic interrupted many school/community partnerships and collaborations. In interviews with DHM Research, some community-based organization leaders lamented lost progress.

“There was great momentum [for SSA implementation] at the beginning, but the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic understandably brought that to a halt. Now, even though the height of the pandemic is over and most schools have returned to in-person instruction, several community-based organizations [have been] told by school personnel that there is no space for them to conduct business within their schools, even though these spaces were there pre-COVID. There is a collective feeling that collaboration is going backward—not because of the SSA, but because it didn't buffer us from what hit us.”

—Community-Based Organization Leader



## SSA IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT PHOENIX–TALENT SCHOOL DISTRICT



Foundations for a Better Oregon partnered with DHM Research to spotlight how Phoenix–Talent School District leveraged new SSA funding and partnerships to improve student mental health, build trust with migrant and Spanish-speaking communities, and respond to crisis.

Five years after implementation, the Student Success Act (SSA) has brought many benefits to Phoenix-Talent School District. The biggest bright spots have been in the realms of supporting mental health and engaging with migrant and Spanish-speaking communities. These connections are important not just in the district’s day-to-day operations but were also critical to navigating the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 Alameda Fire.

In this rural area, where schools are small and resources are scarce, the SSA introduced new community engagement opportunities that helped the district “offer what [the] community’s been asking for a long time.” The most requested community resource—even before the pandemic— was better mental health services. Since this need went beyond what the district alone could provide, funding from the SSA’s Student Investment Account (SIA) allowed Phoenix-Talent to hire new counselors and partner with Medford-based La Clinica Health Centers. That partnership opened the door to new mental health resources—including a therapist in each elementary school—and has allowed the district to place a greater emphasis on mental health care for students and staff. Even though providing such resources was an anticipated SSA outcome, Phoenix-Talent administrators are surprised at how integral these services have become:

“What I didn’t anticipate is that the services with SIA are a staple now. ... We couldn’t have gotten through the pandemic—we couldn’t have gotten through fire recovery—without those services that were started with those funds.”

This was especially clear during the Alameda Fire— the most destructive wildfire in Oregon’s recorded history—which destroyed more than 2,600 homes between Ashland, Talent, Phoenix, and Medford. During the fire, it took several weeks for the Red Cross to come and help—and even longer for the Federal Emergency Management Agency—so much of the community’s immediate needs were handled by local leadership, including Phoenix-Talent administrators. Community trust—something Phoenix-Talent had been cultivating since SSA’s inception—played a crucial role in mitigating this disaster.



**SSA IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT**  
**PHOENIX–TALENT SCHOOL DISTRICT**

“When you have Department of Homeland Security trucks pulling in, it is not a celebration for a lot of people. And a lot of people in our community don't know who they trust. But the one person or entity that people trust is the school district, for sure. ... Just wearing a Phoenix-Talent T-shirt or a hat, people automatically trusted me—not even knowing me. People were just buying gift cards from Fred Meyer—just handing me stacks [to hand out to people]. We needed our families, and they needed us as a default trusted partner for everything.”

Partnerships born from SSA programming also buffered the community against the fire’s devastating aftermath. Phoenix-Talent staff served as a hub directing community members to much-needed resources like mental health services from La Clinica:

“I don't want to call COVID a blessing. But the silver lining is, we were developing those relationships due to COVID. And at the same time, with the SSA and SIA, we were developing relationships with our community and schools. We [knew] the people at Jackson County Emergency Operations. ... We partnered with La Clinica due to our engagement with the Student Investment Account. With the fire, we couldn't have responded the way we did if we [hadn't] had intentional connections with groups of people.”

Crises like these are a reminder of the importance of community and the dynamic relationships—made possible in this case by the SIA—that foster crisis response and resilience. Even so, administrators expressed concern that they will lose some of those partnerships over time. Providing opportunities, funding, and guidance for maintaining partnerships may mitigate this risk. Also, although several years have gone by since the pandemic and fire, it has taken Phoenix-Talent longer than expected to rebuild, raising concerns for the future of affected students. Research shows that students who lost homes in the fire aren't recovering at the same rate as their peers and “are still making little to no growth in academics.” Despite the mental health support Phoenix-Talent has already put in place, this particular demographic needs specialized help. Phoenix-Talent recognizes that while its current SSA efforts buffered the community during the crises, it has little or no planning in place to deal with the aftereffects; this is likely true for most districts in the state. District leadership sees a need for greater state support to reinforce emergency preparedness for schools and, where possible, provide funding security for those that do experience an emergency. Despite experiencing two public crises in the past five years, Phoenix-Talent School District has seen major improvements in family engagement, especially among migrant and Spanish-speaking families. One administrator recalled a recent math night in which Spanish-speaking participants “could have stayed all night” asking questions about their children’s education and the curriculum. Another talked about their migrant education program, which has gotten Spanish-speaking families more involved in the district and more willing to offer feedback.





**SSA IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT**  
**PHOENIX–TALENT SCHOOL DISTRICT**

“On the first day of our summer experience for migrant education, there were some busing issues. Normally, I think our families might not have expressed the issues that we had, but they stormed to the district office from the outlet, which, in one hand, you're like, ‘Oh my gosh, there's all these families that are kind of angry about the busing right now.’ But the good news was, they knew where to go; they knew who they could trust and talk to. The mere fact that a group of family members that traditionally would not feel comfortable going to a district office of the school district did—without hesitation—really made me proud [and] makes me feel glad that more people have a voice than just the few really loud people that often times drive decisions made in school districts because they have privilege.”

This is a definite shift from how families previously engaged with the district. Phoenix-Talent has been strategically empowering families and parents to be facilitators, which has bolstered engagement and garnered “richer information” to guide district planning and decisions. Because of these engagement efforts, the district’s migrant students have had an unprecedented 100% graduation rate for several years in a row. Phoenix-Talent is a prime example of how SSA funding can inspire school districts to authentically and meaningfully engage with their community.

Phoenix-Talent largely attributes these successes—both during the crises and in general—to leadership; the district is conscientious about bringing on new staff who “share the values of supporting the whole community.” As other case studies have mentioned, there has been a shift in the overall mindset around inclusivity. Creating opportunities and staffing pipelines to uphold these values is a promising way to maintain that momentum.<sup>6</sup>



6 DHM Research. (2024, October). *Student Success Act Implementation Spotlight: Phoenix-Talent School District*.

# HOW ARE SCHOOL DISTRICTS INVESTING SSA FUNDING?

When designing the SSA, policymakers debated how much latitude the law should allow school districts in investing SIA funds. Ultimately, they settled on what they thought was the right balance of prescriptive planning, community

engagement, and data review requirements that gave districts sufficient flexibility to decide which investments would best serve local students. To guide district investments, the SSA specified six allowable uses for SIA funding.<sup>7</sup>

## STUDENT INVESTMENT ACCOUNT ALLOWABLE USES

<p><b>IMPROVING STUDENT HEALTH AND SAFETY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expanding social-emotional learning and development, student mental and behavioral health services, student health and wellness, trauma-informed practices, and access to school health professionals.</li> <li>Making facility improvements that improve student health and safety.</li> </ul>	<p><b>WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive literacy programs in pre-K through third grade.</li> <li>Culturally responsive practices and programs in grades six through eight, including counseling and student support connected to colleges and careers.</li> <li>Broadened curricular options at all grade levels (e.g., access to art, music, physical education, and science) and access to librarians.</li> </ul>
<p><b>INCREASING INSTRUCTIONAL TIME</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing more hours or days of instructional time, summer programs, or before-school or after-school programs.</li> <li>Making technological investments that minimize the class time used for student assessments.</li> </ul>	<p><b>REDUCING CLASS SIZE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increasing the number of instructional assistants, educators, and counselors.</li> <li>Using evidence-based criteria to maintain appropriate student-teacher ratios and staff caseloads.</li> </ul>
<p><b>ONGOING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School districts and charter schools may use a portion of SIA funds to improve ongoing community engagement practices.</li> </ul>	<p><b>ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Every year, school districts and charter schools may use up to 5% or \$500,000 of the total amount spent (whichever is lower) for administrative costs.</li> </ul>

<sup>7</sup> Oregon Department of Education. (2024, January). *The Student Investment Account: 2024 Legislative Report*.

Now that schools have emerged from the peak of pandemic disruptions, state and local data is beginning to paint a picture of how SIA resources are being budgeted and (presumably) spent. The data shows school districts are investing their new SIA funds broadly across the SIA’s six allowable use categories, with the majority opting to invest in student health and safety, followed by more well-rounded educational opportunities.



### How School Districts Budgeted 2023-24 SIA Funds

Education Service District	Total SIA Budget	Health and Safety	Increased Instructional Time	Ongoing Community Engagement	Reduced Class Size	Well Rounded Education
<b>All Grantees</b>	<b>\$525,248,844</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>31%</b>
Clackamas	\$50,171,648	28%	3%	3%	32%	30%
Columbia	\$7,583,746	22%	11%	3%	18%	41%
Douglas	\$12,574,574	35%	10%	0%	9%	45%
Grant	\$1,302,223	53%	12%	8%	0%	28%
Harney	\$1,884,173	35%	2%	2%	12%	47%
High Desert	\$27,163,804	40%	9%	5%	28%	16%
Intermountain	\$21,953,775	40%	9%	2%	12%	35%
Jefferson	\$3,738,592	48%	0%	1%	5%	41%
Lake	\$1,065,308	14%	30%	9%	17%	29%
Lane	\$41,500,202	32%	13%	6%	14%	32%
Linn Benton Lincoln	\$31,901,586	39%	7%	2%	19%	30%
Malheur	\$6,205,588	55%	4%	0%	15%	23%
Multnomah	\$83,828,923	33%	3%	4%	17%	41%
North Central	\$1,296,445	9%	0%	2%	6%	81%
Northwest Regional	\$93,700,515	36%	2%	4%	32%	25%
South Coast	\$10,949,505	47%	3%	3%	18%	23%
Southern Oregon	\$48,458,181	37%	4%	4%	19%	32%
Wallowa	\$1,148,785	34%	0%	0%	0%	64%
Willamette	\$78,821,271	38%	8%	8%	15%	29%

A regional view of how school districts in each of Oregon’s 19 ESDs budgeted their SIA funds in 2023–2024.

Data Source: Oregon Department of Education.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Budget percentages may not add up to 100% due to incomplete data. Preliminary data available in spring 2024 shows a limited number of local budget line items uncategorized by SIA allowable use. These may include administrative costs and other indirect or unallocated expenses. ODE expects complete data to be available by the end of 2024.

## INVESTING IN STUDENT HEALTH AND SAFETY

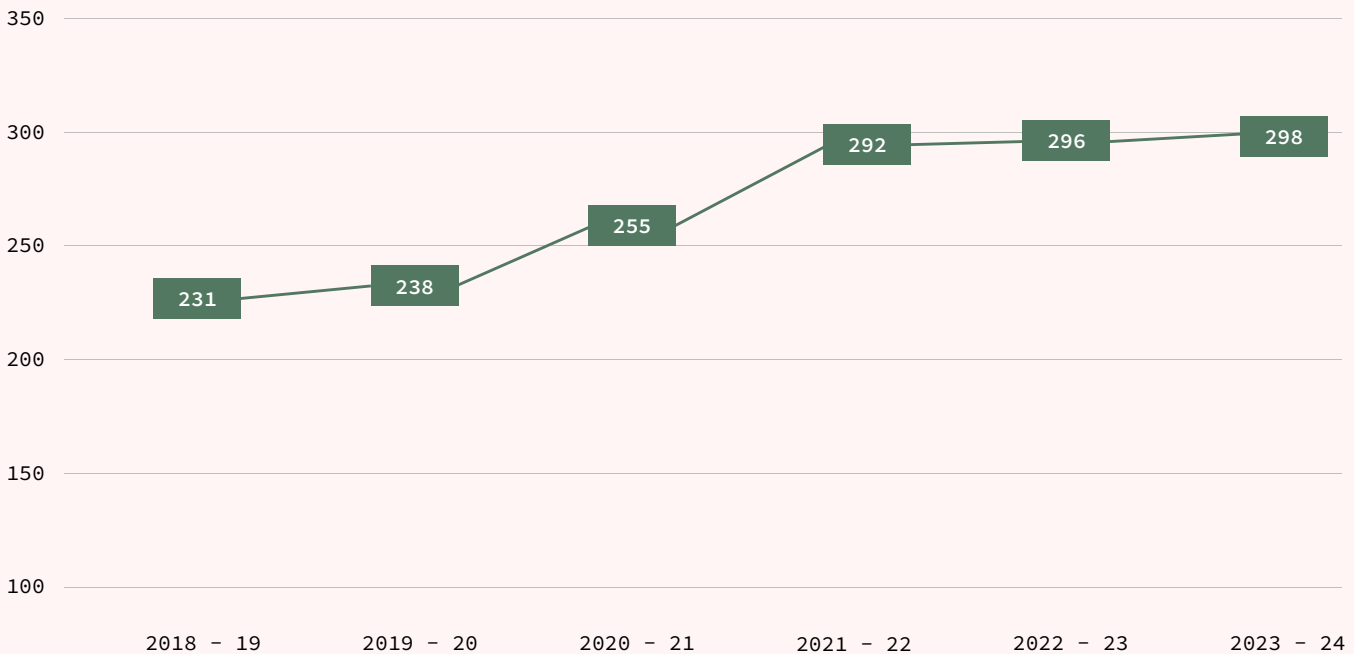
When state legislators began developing the SSA, they were already hearing from educators, families, and communities who urgently wanted more support for student health and wellness. Inevitably, this existing need was exacerbated by the pandemic.

In focus groups, many regional education leaders emphasized that social, emotional, mental, and physical health is critical to student learning. ESD leaders and staff noted that thanks to the SSA, schools are now better equipped to support “the whole student” rather than focusing solely on academic performance. As an example, one school district held a comprehensive districtwide training on trauma and trauma-informed practices. Another regularly conducts empathy interviews with students to better understand their needs. Informed by student feedback, the district can develop

better strategies for encouraging regular school attendance and keeping ninth graders on track for graduation. A broader perspective on student success—combined with new SIA funding—has also allowed schools and districts to expand critical mental health support.<sup>9</sup>

Conversations in the field and workforce data from ODE point to significant increases in staff who directly support students’ social, emotional, mental, and physical health. Year over year, the number of nurses, psychologists, and social workers has increased statewide since the SSA’s passage, likely bolstered by federal pandemic relief funds. In addition, the percentage of Oregon school districts that are staffing school counselors within the recommended ratio of one counselor per 250 students has grown from 2% in 2016–2017 to 24% in 2023–2024.

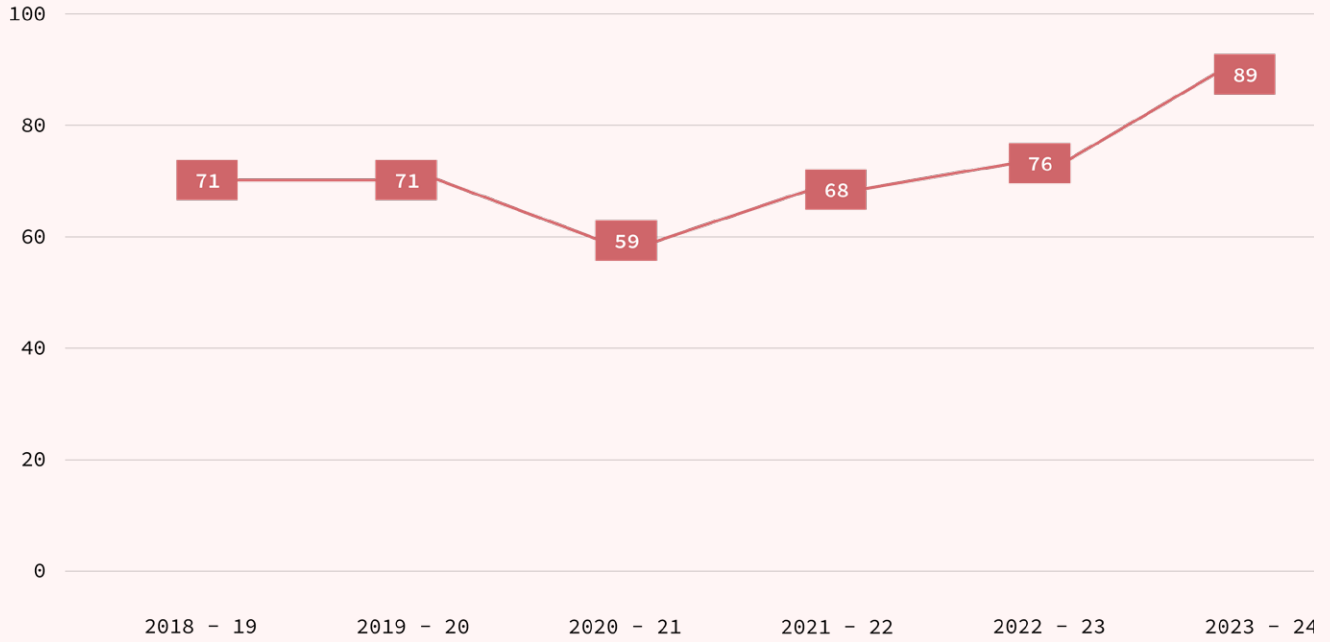
**Statewide Number of School Nurses in Oregon**



Data Source: Oregon Department of Education.

<sup>9</sup> DHM Research. (2024, October). *Student Success Act Implementation Spotlight: Regional Collaboration and Infrastructure*.

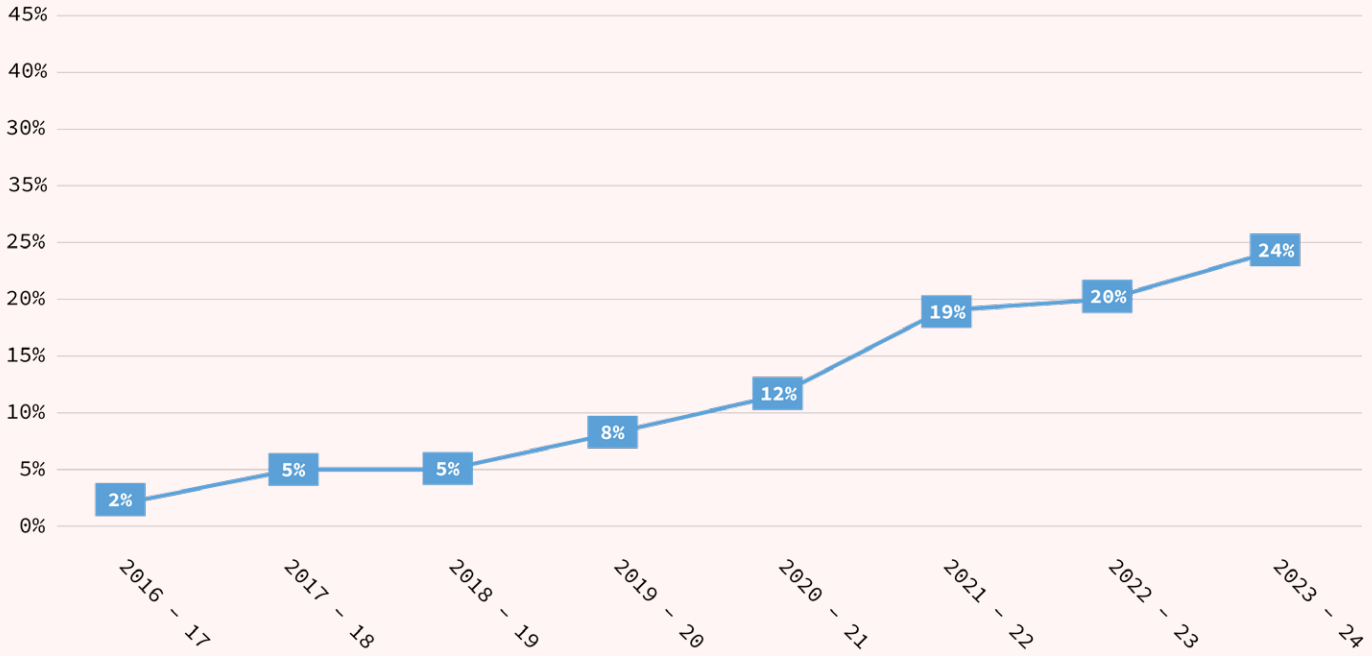
### Statewide Number of School Psychologists in Oregon



Data Source: Oregon Department of Education.



**Percentage of Oregon School Districts Within the Recommended Ratio of Students to School Counselors (250:1)**



Data Source: Oregon Department of Education.<sup>10</sup>

Oregon’s ability to hire more school staff supporting school health and safety was especially timely during the pandemic, and it remains important to bolstering student success. Sustaining these gains will depend not only on continued state investment in the K–12 system, but also on creating an adequate workforce pipeline along with strategies for recruiting and retaining these professionals throughout the state. “The focus is starting to shift [toward] maintaining and deepening these initiatives, rather than continually creating new ones,” said one leader at High Desert ESD.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Staff position data was not available from Eugene School District 4J for the 2022-23 school year.

<sup>11</sup> DHM Research (2024, October). *Student Success Act Implementation Spotlight: High Desert Education Service District*.

## WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION AND HANDS-ON LEARNING

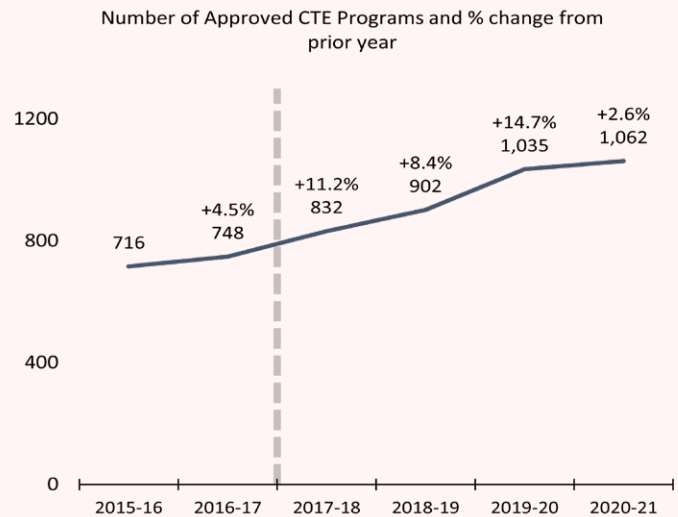
The SIA’s investments in well-rounded education reflect what education scholar Dr. Michael Fullan calls deep learning. Fullan’s research on education systems change shows a strong link between schools giving students well-rounded educational opportunities—including more engaging academic curricula, hands-on learning opportunities, and varied opportunities for applying knowledge—and nurturing deeper learning competencies like creativity, communication, citizenship, critical thinking, character, and collaboration.

In its most recent report to the Legislature on SIA implementation, ODE detailed the variety and impact of school district investments in well-rounded education.

"Nearly one-third of SIA grantees reported changes and improvements related to well-rounded education. These were identified through increases in offerings of and enrollment in extracurricular activities. There was also frequent mention of increased participation of focal group students who may have previously experienced barriers to participation in those extracurriculars. Further, as investments in [well-rounded education] center whole-child learning, they were also attributed for engendering improvements in both student engagement and social emotional learning."

—Oregon Department of Education<sup>12</sup>

### Statewide Number of CTE Programs in Oregon



According to this graph produced by ODE, Oregon has seen a 42% increase in CTE programs since High School Success was launched.<sup>13</sup>

The High School Success Initiative has also significantly increased the availability of career and technical education (CTE) programs across the state. CTE programs have long been recognized as boosting student engagement, facilitating deeper learning, and promoting student success in school and adulthood. Since 2017, the High School Success Initiative has contributed to a 42% increase in CTE programs available to students across Oregon.

<sup>12</sup> Oregon Department of Education. (2024, January). *The Student Investment Account: 2024 Legislative Report*.

<sup>13</sup> Oregon Department of Education. (n.d.). *Impact of High School Success on CTE Programs and Enrollment*.

# DOING MORE TO MEET THE SSA'S PROMISE

## STRONGER PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY

As local education leaders inform their communities about SSA programs and investments, there's growing recognition that the success of Oregon children is a shared responsibility. SSA implementation has sparked or expanded formal and informal school/community partnerships, with every school district tailoring its approach to its community's unique strengths and assets.

According to a review of school/community partnerships conducted by DHM Research, many districts focus on strengthening ties with local organizations. For example, Forest Grove School District is enhancing partnerships with community-based organizations like Adelante Mujeres and Centro Cultural to improve communication and engagement pathways; Beaverton School District is revitalizing school-based teams with support from a district-level community resource coordinator to sustain the involvement of local organizations, businesses, and faith-based groups; and Klamath Falls School District is collaborating with local community groups to support parents of focal students to participate in community engagement processes.

Some districts are emphasizing partnerships with higher education institutions and local employers. Forest Grove School District is collaborating on initiatives such as dual credit and mechatronics programs to bridge K–12 and higher education

pathways. It also fosters partnerships through industry advisory boards, internships, and career-oriented events. Ashland School District is developing industry sector partnerships and community tours to expand work-based learning opportunities, and Medford School District is collaborating with employers through programs like apprenticeships and health care workforce training.

In Oregon's more densely populated regions, community-based organizations (CBOs) play a crucial role in supporting students and families. Since many of these organizations are led by culturally specific communities, they hold deep, trusted relationships with underserved students and families, making them essential partners in Oregon's education ecosystem. CBOs work both independently and in partnership with school districts to provide a range of in-school, after-school, and summer programs and services that support academic growth, social and emotional learning, and mental and physical health.

Although the SSA is advancing a community-centered approach to public education, challenges to school/community partnerships remain. Addressing these barriers is essential to ensuring that all students—and especially those who are historically underserved—benefit from the strong school/community partnerships that are integral to the SSA's goals and promise.



## CHALLENGES TO SCHOOL/COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

### A LACK OF CAPACITY

Schools and partner organizations are frequently stretched thin as they address urgent daily challenges, leaving them with little time and resources for long-term planning and collaboration.

### POWER AND RESOURCE DISPARITIES

School districts typically have greater legal authority and financial resources than their CBO, nonprofit, and faith-based partners, creating a power imbalance that can hinder the formation of mutually beneficial partnerships.

### LIMITED INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

While the SSA’s K–12 programs *require* school districts to involve their communities in investment decisions, they merely *encourage* school districts to invest SSA funds in community partnerships that deliver student programs and services. School and community leaders acknowledge it is difficult to mandate partnerships and investments in a way that also promotes authentic school/community relationships and collaboration. Still, the state could take a more prominent role in incentivizing and supporting such efforts.

### A LACK OF CONNECTORS

During SSA implementation, ESDs stepped into a “bridging” role between schools, school districts, and community partner organizations and service providers. However, schools and school districts could benefit from additional support in identifying and connecting with community partners who can help them meet students’ needs.

## MOVING FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

Over the past five years, most school districts have made progress toward authentically engaging students, families, and educators. But despite the many bright spots across our state, it will take more work to achieve a consistent and deep level of engagement that truly puts students and families at the center of decision-making.

According to interviews with ESD leaders conducted by DHM Research, SSA implementation has either launched or expanded culturally responsive communication and engagement between school districts and communities.<sup>14</sup> School districts are now more mindful of how different communities communicate and are using new listening strategies to better understand community perspectives and feedback.

14 DHM Research (2024, October). *Student Success Act Implementation Spotlight: Regional Collaboration and Infrastructure*.

For instance, one ESD found success with focus groups, story circles, and empathy interviews geared toward whole communities as well as specific student and family groups.

**“I think our districts that were really hesitant five years ago of what this process could look like, they’ve really embraced it... and it’s been fun to watch school districts try out strategies, see where their successes are, try out different modes of communication, and kind of change that idea of ‘engagement is one way.’”**

**–ESD Leader**

In another example, an ESD invested SSA dollars to provide professional development for educators throughout the region to teach Oregon’s Tribal History/Shared History curriculum. This led school districts in the region to come together a partner with local Native American families on further efforts to better support Native students.

**“Without SSA funds, we would not have been able to provide that professional development, which then led us to apply as a consortium for a Title VI grant. And so districts have been working together with families, and they are driving that plan.”**

**–ESD Leader**



Though community engagement efforts began as an SSA requirement, ESD leaders believe they are making the K–12 system’s commitment to inclusivity “more and more automatic.” New school district investments in culturally specific initiatives and programs—an SSA priority—have also led to more transparency and trust between districts and communities. With access to additional resources and deeper community engagement, some have observed school district leaders opening up to new culturally specific strategies and partnerships that were once hindered by fears of using up limited resources.

## LEVELS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



STANCE TOWARDS COMMUNITY					
IGNORE	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	DEFER
INTENTION					
Protecting School/District Interests <b>Unintended Impact to Consider:</b> <i>Marginalizing Communities</i>	Keeping Communities Updated <b>Unintended Impact to Consider:</b> <i>Placating &amp; Underestimating Community Wisdom</i>	Receiving Community Input <b>Unintended Impact to Consider:</b> <i>Tokenizing &amp; Gatekeeping Community Engagement</i>	Meaningfully Engaging Community Voice <b>Unintended Impact to Consider:</b> <i>Community Voice is Not Heard</i>	Collaborating and Sharing Power with Communities <b>Unintended Impact to Consider:</b> <i>Collaborative Process Derailed by Power Dynamics &amp; Lack of Relational Trust</i>	Communities Drive and Own the Work <b>Unintended Impact to Consider:</b> <i>Sovereignty and Core Agreements are Not Honored</i>
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT GOALS					
Deny access to decision-making processes	Provide students, families & community with relevant information for them to support district/school goals	Gather input from students, families & community without including them in decision-making	Ensure students, families & community needs and assets are integrated into district process & planning	Ensure student, family & community capacity play a leadership role in implementation of decisions	Foster lasting educational equity through community-driven schools that are culturally rooted and responsive to whole and sovereign people and communities

The Oregon Department of Education created a community engagement spectrum to assess and deepen engagement practices in the K–12 system during SSA implementation.<sup>15</sup>

Even though much progress has been made, there remains a strong need to sustain and improve how school districts practice meaningful community engagement and build community partnerships. In interviews with DHM Research, some CBO leaders expressed a sense that pandemic disruptions have led some districts to lose focus on targeted community engagement and strategies to support historically underserved students. Some also observed that frequent turnover of school district leadership can slow or reverse progress on school/community partnerships, sometimes breaking previous leaders’ commitments to listen to and learn from impacted students and families.

Many ESD and CBO leaders also emphasized the importance of building authentic feedback loops and sharing the actual impact of feedback with communities. One administrator with High Desert ESD emphasized wanting families to know that their words matter and their requests are taken into account even when there is no concrete or immediate change. This requires districts to prioritize transparent communication with community members during and after community engagement, and to make clear distinctions between short-term plans that require few resources and longer-term plans that are more difficult to implement.

<sup>15</sup> Oregon Department of Education. (n.d.). *Student Investment Account: Community Engagement Toolkit*.

# A LONG ROAD IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Over the last five years, Oregon school districts have leveraged the SSA to prioritize student health, safety, and well-being, all of which are critical to improving student learning. The High School Success Initiative—one of the first targeted improvement strategies to be fully implemented—has already contributed to improved student outcomes, including high school graduation rates. Further, collaborations and partnerships developed during early SSA implementation served to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic and wildfires while also building the resilience that is crucial to weathering and recovering from future crises.

Individually, these strategies and investments—along with many others made possible by the SSA—have made an appreciable difference in students’ lives over a relatively short but very turbulent period. On the whole, the SSA is fostering a more community-centered K–12 education system that better recognizes students’ unique strengths and needs, acknowledges that school districts can’t work alone, and welcomes youth, families, educators, and community members as true partners.

The long-term impact of the SSA’s ongoing investments in K–12 students and schools remains to be seen, and we have certainly not yet achieved the population-level progress on student academic outcomes that every family rightfully and urgently expects. In the arc of large-scale systems change, Oregon is walking a long road toward ensuring every child has what they need to learn, grow and thrive. The SSA’s early impacts offer hopeful signs that we are moving in the right direction.



Foundations for a Better Oregon’s series on the Student Success Act can be found online at: [www.betteroregon.org/ssa](http://www.betteroregon.org/ssa)

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