



# OREGON'S STUDENT SUCCESS ACT

Illuminating Five Years of Implementation and Impact

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

5



At Foundations for a Better Oregon, we believe every child in every corner of our state deserves the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive. That opportunity remains persistently—and unacceptably—out of reach for so many children, families, and communities.

Over the last two decades, Oregon has made sporadic gains for certain groups of children, but never sustained systemwide and statewide improvement in public education. Whether we measure against our goals, compare ourselves to other states, or look at our progress over time, one thing is clear: We have much more work to do, and we must commit to doing it together.

Five years ago, passionate champions for Oregon children fought to pass the Student Success Act (SSA) and celebrated when it was signed into law. State, school, and community leaders hit the ground running on a historic effort to improve how Oregon's K-12 system serves all students and closes disparities. That work was severely tested by a global pandemic and major shifts in Oregon's social, economic, and political landscapes.

Despite these obstacles, the SSA has laid the foundation for lasting change in Oregon's education system. Now, we stand at a crossroads: Will Oregon backtrack, as we have so often in the past? Or will we move forward with determination—and even pick up the pace?

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Making progress for Oregon children requires shared vision to guide, unite, and sustain us. The SSA is bringing shared vision into focus with major new investment and infrastructure as well as new momentum toward a high-quality, inclusive, community-centered, and accountable public education system. [Public opinion research](#) reaffirms that Oregonians strongly believe in the SSA’s values, priorities, and strategies, even though their awareness and perceptions of K–12 improvement remain mixed.<sup>1</sup>

Building on the SSA’s foundation and the lessons we learned during its first five years of implementation, we offer guiding principles and recommendations to accelerate and sustain progress for all children.



**1**

**Real and sustained change takes time, focus, and commitment.** Oregon must learn from the SSA to maintain and amplify what’s working, and resist the urge to abandon or distract K–12 improvement efforts.

**2**

**Better results come from systems that continuously improve and stay accountable.** Oregon must maintain and build upon the SSA’s new infrastructure and strategies for K–12 system accountability and improvement.

**3**

**Success depends on ensuring every child can learn, grow, and thrive.** Oregon must rely on community wisdom and partnerships to tailor and target support, close disparities, and better serve all K–12 students.

<sup>1</sup> Oregon Values and Beliefs Center. (2024, September 26). [Oregon Education Priorities and Planning](#).

**1**

**REAL AND SUSTAINED CHANGE TAKES TIME, FOCUS, AND COMMITMENT**

In 2019, Oregon’s Joint Committee on Student Success invited experts to share insights from successful education systems around the world. One takeaway stood out: High-performing systems focus on one or two improvement strategies and sustain them for a decade or more.<sup>2</sup> The Oregon Secretary of State’s Audit Division reinforced the need to stay focused in its most recent *K–12 Education Systemic Risk Report*, released in 2022: “Taken together, the Student Success Act and Measure 98 [High School Success] comprise Oregon’s fourth major K–12 improvement effort since the early 1990s. The previous three were all abandoned.”<sup>3</sup>

Oregon’s repeated failure to follow through on K–12 improvement efforts is a frustrating yet understandable pattern. When the well-being and future of Oregon children are at stake, progress can feel agonizingly slow. Research and reality both show that abandoning improvement efforts before they’ve had a chance to take root has trapped Oregon in a constant cycle of early implementation without ever reaching the full potential of systems change.

The systemic risk report findings, which echo foundational research on education systems change, point to another major challenge: an overload of improvement initiatives and a lack of coherence across Oregon’s K–12 system. The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) currently manages over 100 grant programs, each with its own goals, expectations, and requirements. While aligning implementation for nine programs through Integrated Guidance is a promising start, the state laws that authorize and govern each program complicate efforts

to further simplify and streamline processes. As a state, we must focus our improvement efforts instead of creating competing priorities that confuse and distract. Policymakers must resist the temptation to continually introduce new initiatives; instead, they should direct and support ODE to further consolidate grant programs into a coherent and effective framework for K–12 system improvement.

Staying focused doesn’t mean Oregon should be content with the current pace of change. K–12 improvement requires setting clear goals for students—what we want them to know, learn, and experience—and then developing coherent systems focused on the strategies and practices that evidence and experience tell us will have a positive impact. As a state, we must learn to recognize the early signs of progress, sustain and amplify what’s working, and adjust—but not recklessly abandon—what hasn’t yet delivered.

**“Reforming education is a complex, long-term effort, requiring leaders and policymakers to set clear goals and foster a long-term focus. A large number of separate programs, unrealistic timelines, and frequent changes in funding priorities and leadership can undermine reform efforts.”**

**—Audits Division, Oregon Secretary of State<sup>4</sup>**

2 Oregon Legislative Policy and Research Office. (2019, January). *Joint Committee on Student Success: Report on 2018 Activities*.

3 Oregon Secretary of State, Oregon Audits Division. (2022, May). *K–12 Education: Systemic Risk Report*.

4 Ibid.

**2**

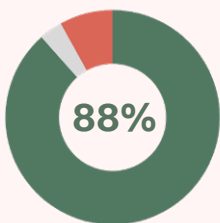
**BETTER RESULTS DEPEND ON SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

For many years, Oregon’s K–12 system was chronically underfunded, leading to a commonly held belief that greater investment was all that was needed to meet our goals for students and schools. Funded by a new corporate activities tax, the SSA brought a historic \$1 billion annual increase in early childhood and K–12 education funding. Although additional investment is crucial, the SSA’s focus on K–12 system improvement and accountability is an often overlooked but essential part of the law’s story.

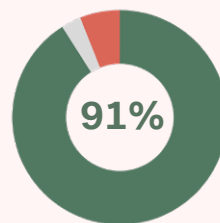
Under the SSA, Oregon has started building an accountability infrastructure to guide and support improvement. For key metrics like literacy, regular school attendance, ninth grade on track, and high school graduation, ODE and school districts have co-developed ambitious but achievable growth targets for improving student outcomes and closing disparities that impact historically underserved students. [Public opinion research](#) shows that Oregonians strongly support requiring school districts to create plans and budgets that will better serve all students, as well as holding schools and districts accountable for reaching their improvement goals.<sup>5</sup>

Now, it’s up to policymakers, community leaders, and advocates to ensure ODE is diligently monitoring school districts’ progress, celebrating and reinforcing success, and stepping in with support and direction when needed. From ODE to school districts to schools, we can do more to support continuous learning and improvement at every level, with state leaders, district leaders, school administrators, educators, families, and students all invested in achieving shared goals.

The SSA has made strides toward ensuring that disaggregated data guides K–12 investment decisions and improvement efforts, but Oregon can still do more to make transparent and accessible data readily available to district leaders, school leaders, educators, and communities as they make decisions and track progress. We should keep innovating to broaden how Oregon measures student learning, and find better ways to evaluate and nurture key conditions for learning such as students’ well-being, safety, and sense of belonging. ODE’s current efforts to improve how data is publicly displayed hold promise, but the state must also resolve disagreements about which metrics should be used consistently across the state, and address obstacles to collecting reliable, meaningful, and actionable data.



**88% of Oregonians agree school districts should be required to set clear strategies, plans, and budgets to improve schools and better serve all students.**



**91% of Oregonians agree schools and districts should be required to set attainable, realistic, and ambitious goals for academic progress, attendance, and graduation for the next five years.**

OVBC survey of Oregon adults, April 29–May 28, 2024 (representative sample, N = 1,626)

<sup>5</sup> Oregon Values and Beliefs Center. (2024, September 26). [Oregon Education Priorities and Planning](#).

“But to reach our most ambitious goals for children,” FBO Executive Director Whitney Grubbs wrote in *The Oregonian* in 2022, “we have to build on the Student Success Act and apply its vision, values, and equity-driven approach to the State School Fund.”<sup>6</sup> Although the SSA’s over \$2 billion biennial increase in public education funding was historic, it represents only a slice of the state’s total education budget.

It’s time to take a broader look at all of Oregon’s K–12 investments—including the more than \$10 billion State School Fund—and develop a more coherent education funding, spending, and accountability strategy. “Only then will the entirety of our public education system be geared toward ensuring every child in Oregon—no matter their identity, zip code, or circumstances—thrives at school and in life,” wrote Grubbs.

At FBO, we applaud Governor Tina Kotek for moving Oregon in that direction. The Governor is laying important groundwork by bringing together a wide range of leaders inside and outside the education system to discuss how clear goals, adequate funding, strategic spending, and efficient systems work together to deliver better results. During Oregon’s 2025 legislative session, we encourage ongoing dialogue, collaborative solutions, and bold leadership to advance a modern funding and accountability strategy that turns our state’s education goals into a reality.



<sup>6</sup> Grubbs, W. (2022, June 8). *Opinion: To Improve K-12, Look to State School Fund*. The Oregonian.

**3**

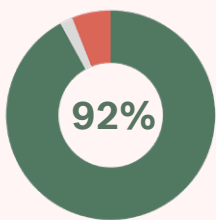
**ENSURE EVERY CHILD CAN LEARN, GROW, AND THRIVE**

Despite a divisive political climate, [public opinion research](#) shows Oregonians support the SSA’s core objectives at exceptionally high rates. The findings show they emphatically embrace the SSA’s vision of high-quality learning in safe and inclusive schools for all students. A strong majority also agree that the public education system must give every student the same chance and support to succeed in school, no matter their background or circumstances.<sup>7</sup> The SSA’s investments and strategies to support student health and well-being and reduce academic disparities are crucial to ensuring all Oregon students can succeed.

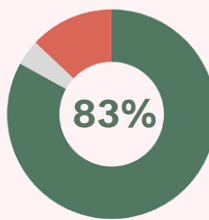
The science of childhood development clearly shows that children learn best when they feel safe, seen, heard, and valued, and that learning begins well before they enter kindergarten. This research aligns with recommendations from the SSA’s Student Success Plans, which connect the resources, conditions, and relationships needed to better support children from historically underserved communities. State and local decision-makers should regularly review these recommendations, which are developed by community-centered advisory groups, and use them to inform decisions.

Last, the SSA’s approach recognizes that educating children and improving schools is not the work of state and school leaders alone. Oregon children deserve an ecosystem of support that extends beyond the K–12 classroom and school year. The state must continue helping school districts to authentically engage students, families, educators, and communities, and ensure that local input meaningfully informs local decisions and guides school improvement.

The state can also do more to build and maintain a range of school/community partnership models that will inherently vary across urban, suburban, and rural communities and uplift unique local strengths and needs. We urge school districts and the state to steadily deepen their collaboration and their investment in early learning providers, community-based organizations, and other community partners. Each of these partners plays a crucial role in helping students thrive inside and outside the classroom, and must be recognized and properly resourced to do this vital work.



**92% of Oregonians agree every student deserves a rich academic experience, fully including students who experience disability.**



**83% of Oregonians agree schools must focus on ending persistent academic disparities so every student has the same chance to succeed in school, no matter their background.**

OVBC survey of Oregon adults, April 29–May 28, 2024 (representative sample, N = 1,626)

<sup>7</sup> Oregon Values and Beliefs Center. (2024, September 26). [Oregon Education Priorities and Planning](#).

## THIS WORK MATTERS, AND THERE IS MORE TO DO

Over the last five years, the SSA has renewed Oregon’s focus on K–12 improvement. It has built new infrastructure for systems change and accountability while delivering resources and support to students, schools, and communities. These important—though often invisible—steps forward matter. They have made a difference, but there is far more to do.

Over the next five years, Oregon’s action—or inaction—will be crucial. We cannot look away from the difficult realities we see in the data or avoid listening to stories that might make us uncomfortable. We must draw hope from our early progress while maintaining the necessary urgency and focus to finally close long-standing disparities and reach our goals for all students. We must follow through on promising efforts while asking tough questions and always striving to do better. And we must embrace a shared vision for public education in which educating and caring for Oregon children is truly a shared responsibility.

As SSA implementation continues, Oregonians should know real and sustained change will take time, focus, and commitment. They should also expect better results—and demand nothing less—from systems that continuously improve and stay accountable. Above all, success will depend on our collective determination to make certain that every child in Oregon has what they need to learn, grow, and thrive.



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)

The suggested citation for this series is: *Foundations for a Better Oregon. (2024, September). Oregon’s Student Success Act: Illuminating Five Years of Implementation and Impact.*



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit: [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)