

Bend-La Pine Schools
District Opening Statement
May 18, 2023

Part One: Our Shared Vision (Board Chair Melissa Barnes Dholakia)

First, I want to express my appreciation for everyone sitting around this table. I see and recognize the hard work and dedication you each bring to your roles every day, as well as to this process. Nearly everyone at this table, at our core, is an educator. And while some of us have shifted our focus to district-level responsibilities, the classroom experience of our team members ranges from 10 to 22 years. We recognize the changes and the new needs school staff face today, but we believe that much more unites us than separates us.

We are united by our commitment to our students.

We are all fortunate to work in a district where staff are so committed to their students, a finding that has been supported in our surveys and focus groups year after year. And there has never been a time when our students needed us more. The Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murty, has stated that the mental health needs of our youth over the past two years are at a crisis point. And he has persistently advocated for increased funding at the state and national levels to help address it.

But it's not only the mental and emotional health of our students that need our attention – it's their academic achievement as well. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that in 2022, student performance in math suffered the biggest decline since the assessment began in 1990. Reading performance also dropped to 1990s levels. We see this here in Bend-La Pine Schools, where just over half our third graders met state reading standards and a third of our eighth graders met state standards in math. Compounding this, we also continue to have large gaps in outcomes among students from different demographics.

To be sure, issues with students' mental and emotional health, as well as academic gaps, existed before the COVID pandemic. But the last three years have exacerbated these issues. As a result, our teachers, principals and school support staff face more and more challenges. It will require our united commitment – and problem solving – to support our students and each other in this challenging time.

*We are united by our belief that all who work in education
deserve to feel valued, supported, and safe.*

While individuals across professions suffered because of the pandemic, education is a field where staff are experiencing acute stress. According to a recent RAND Corporation study, 56 percent of teachers and 40 percent of school administrators across the nation feel their jobs are not worth the stress they experience. That's significantly higher than before the

pandemic. In Bend-La Pine Schools, we see similar levels of frustration. We share the interest of all our employee groups in creating and sustaining welcoming, supportive and safe workplaces.

We are united by the belief that our schools need more resources.

In 2019, the Oregon Legislature passed the Student Success Act, providing almost \$1 billion annually of additional funding to K-12 education through the Student Investment Account and the High School Success Act. For Bend-La Pine Schools, this translates to about \$17 million of additional funding annually. Working with our staff, students and community, our district prioritized investing in support for our students with mental, social and emotional health challenges as our top priority. Between \$5 million and \$6 million a year is committed to our student success teams, additional counselors, and other support toward this goal. Our second priority has been to reduce the number of students in classrooms, and we have committed Student Investment funds and our federal-relief ESSER funds to help keep class sizes down over the last three years.

But this commitment from the state is not enough. The district shares the Bend Education Association's interest in providing more resources to address the academic and mental health needs of our students. We believe all students in Bend-La Pine Schools should graduate with the academic, social, and emotional skills to ensure success. We want the resources to recruit, support and retain outstanding staff at every level of the organization. We need continued advocacy at the local, state and federal levels so that our schools have what they need for our students to thrive, now and in the future.

Part Two: Context for Our Proposal (Superintendent Steve Cook)

As the district presents its proposal today, we believe it's important that everyone understands important information about the budget for Bend-La Pine Schools. Currently, the governor and Legislature have indicated that K-12 schools will receive \$9.9 billion in state school funding for the next biennium. This is a 6.5 percent total biennial increase over the current funding level. Because the state funds schools at 49 percent and 51 percent over each year of the biennium, this means that the increase in the State School Fund year over year is 2.3 percent. Bend-La Pine's per-student increase in full formula revenue year over year is 1.3 percent. The formula revenue accounts for more than 95 percent of our general fund revenue each year.

Our district has created a budget balanced for our projected allocation from the state's \$9.9 billion education budget. To do this, we used approximately \$5 million from our reserves. We are also funding numerous certified positions and other expenses with federal ESSER funds, which are one-time dollars that will expire in September 2024. It is not gamesmanship to say we are very concerned about funding; it is the reality of where our district is today. We have experienced declines in enrollment since the pandemic began. Currently, we have 1,300 fewer students than we did in March 2020. And as each of us

understands, Oregon funds its schools based on student Average Daily Weighted Membership.

Given this understanding, our district team was surprised by the magnitude of the financial components of the BEA proposal. There are at least 49 items in the BEA proposal that would require additional funding (estimated to be somewhere in the \$70-80 million range), approximately a 35 percent increase in our budget of approximately \$215 million. Here are some of the most notable requests, with our preliminary estimate of the cost of each for the 2023-24 year:

- Employee raises: \$11.5 million for salary schedule increase
- Increased insurance payments: \$5.8 million for cap increase
- Class size: \$21 million for regular classrooms only, not considering extra pay for going over caps
- Extended duty contracts-expansion and raises: \$1.3 million for schedule increases, moves and additions

While it is certainly clear to the district team, we hope it is also clear to the BEA team and all BEA members that proposals such as this are not feasible. We want to discuss realistic financial proposals that reflect responsible stewardship of the district's budget and would not require radical cuts from one area of the budget to fund another area.

We are also aware that the May forecasts came out yesterday, drawing significant attention to the anticipated increased revenues projected to be collected during the remainder of this biennium and possible future biennium increases. These revenues are forecast to create the largest kicker in Oregon state history, surpassing \$5.54 billion. Additionally, the forecast shows corporate tax revenues are projected to be up by approximately \$175 million. Depending on how the legislators choose to earmark these dollars, this could be genuinely positive news, or could mean we receive no new funding at all. We anxiously await the assignment of these additional dollars along with final decisions on early literacy funding outside of the State School Fund. The bottom line, in the next 10 days or so we will find out if any additional dollars are added to the governor's proposed budget that bring us closer to our ask of \$10.3 billion. This has the potential to positively impact our budget, built on the \$9.9 billion funding model. If this is of interest to you, pay attention to whether or not legislators propose increasing the \$9.9 billion number, or better yet, contact them directly and request that they do so.

Finally, we genuinely do understand BEA's concern about the high cost of housing in Bend, which has made it increasingly difficult to attract and retain certified staff. The district is also deeply concerned about this issue. We have already experienced ongoing struggles with staffing, especially with classified staff, who are typically our lowest-paid employees. According to Zillow, the average cost of a home in Bend is over \$677,000. In Bandon, it's about \$460,000; and in Burns, it's about \$169,000. A substantial flaw in Oregon's state school funding model is that each of these districts receives the same per-pupil funding, regardless of cost-of-living differences. As we look beyond bargaining to advocacy, this is an issue the state needs to examine.

Part Three: [The Proposal](#) (HR Director Steve Herron)

Closing: Our Commitment to Collaboration (Steve Cook)

It is our deep belief that the best work in any organization results from collaboration. During the pandemic, our district leaders had to lapse into what I call “command and control” leadership in response to the series of rapidly evolving crises. This is contrary to long-standing traditions of collaboration among the district, schools, and employee groups in Bend-La Pine Schools. I understand some of the frustration about this issue I see reflected in parts of BEA’s proposal. I am committed to restoring trust in collaborative processes at every level of the organization. But not all this needs to happen at the bargaining table. In fact, I would argue that many issues are best tackled by teams in a more focused, less complex environment. A good example of this may be the Culture and Climate task force. Although the work of this team began this spring, I foresee at least a subset of that group continuing into next year, working together to improve levels of belonging and safety for students and staff. I have also heard shared interest between our teams about the structure of professional learning time, another area where we might assign a task force to make a recommendation.

That being said, I want the BEA team to know that we on the district team are committed to creating the best circumstances we can for our certified staff, and all our staff. We know that employee engagement has a profound effect on student engagement and success. This is what unites us – our shared commitment to providing the best outcomes for all.