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March 09, 2009

The Honorable Theodore Kulongoski
160 State Capitol
900 Court Street
Salem, OR 97301-4047

Dear Governor Kulongoski:

As members of the Lane County Board of Commissioners, we too must balance our budget and make some difficult and painful choices in these most difficult of times. Unfortunately, like you, we're "between a rock and a hard place." We're forced to find what cuts will do the least harm to the community.

That is why we urge you to minimize the harm to our Public Schools. We cannot think of a better investment for Oregon and Lane County. Economists would largely agree that there is a strong positive correlation between the educational achievements of our students in the eventual productivity and health of the state's economy.

Our Public Schools are critical economic drivers. The jobs of the future require an educated work force. One of the best predictors of the economic performance of the state will be how our children are doing in school now and in the future. We cannot attract new business without it. This generation of children will not earn incomes high enough to support themselves and the public services our communities will need without a first rate elementary and secondary education. Right now, Oregon has the largest elementary class sizes in the nation. That is a distinction we should be striving to erase. Going backward should not be an option.

Educated children also make better choices when not in school. After-school programs keep many at-risk kids out of trouble. More expensive, overcrowded jails are filled with dropouts. Eighty percent of Oregon prison inmates are high school dropouts. Prison inmates cost society much and contribute nothing for the welfare of the state and our communities.

In addition, a shortened school year would leave many low-income families with no choice but to leave small children unattended.

We know your choices are difficult. We believe OUR Public Schools are a great investment and will only stay that way with adequate funding. That is why we respectfully urge you to not only support our schools, but to use the education stability monies in the Federal stimulus dollars to enhance our educational system.

At the same time, we acknowledge the need to continue funding all essential public safety and health programs. These are needed to keep our communities safe and livable. We need an appropriate balance between the needs of public health and safety and our educational system. Adequate spending on public health and safety is necessary for healthy communities now and spending on Public Education is necessary for the health of those communities in the future. Both are necessary to a vital state. We believe that the policy leaders of this state in conjunction with local officials and the communities they represent can work together to make those choices that assure, not only the present viability of Oregon, but it's future as well.

Sincerely,

Pete Sorenson, chair
Lane County Board of Commissioners