



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

June 2, 2016

Dear Chair Tom Koehler:

As an Oregon state legislator, physician and parent, I am profoundly disappointed in the failure of leadership of the Portland School District in response to test results revealing dangerous levels of lead in the school district water supply. The fact that water tests were conducted in March, but Superintendent Carole Smith only learned of them in the past few days is unacceptable. It also appears that school officials may have known about lead levels above federally accepted standards as far back as 2010 in school district buildings. Worse, it appears that Superintendent Smith is now passing the accountability-buck to subordinates by placing them on leave rather than accepting responsibility for the situation herself. I believe it is Smith who should either resign or be placed on leave by the school board pending an investigation into her incompetence. Portland Public School's cavalier response to this issue, which places children's health and physical development at risk, is deeply concerning.

With 46,000 students, the Portland School District is home to roughly 10% of Oregon K-12 public school students. Portland schools receive roughly 8% of the state schools budget. The failure of Superintendent Smith to properly manage this public health emergency in Oregon's largest school district is the latest in a long-line of leadership failures. Failures that have real consequences for kids and families in Oregon. Every Oregonian, not just residents of the Portland School District, has a stake in the safety, health and academic achievement of students in the Portland district. What happens in Portland affects all of Oregon, for better and for worse.

I urge the Portland school board to take decisive action to replace Superintendent Smith with someone who can restore confidence in the basic management of Oregon's largest school district and who can be a leading and credible voice for reforms to boost education achievement for students in Portland and across the state. Regrettably, Superintendent Smith is no longer a credible voice. In the meantime, I am urging Governor Brown, who also serves as Oregon's top education official, to quickly put the full weight of her office and state government - from the Oregon Health Authority to the DEQ -- behind efforts to investigate and resolve this public health emergency facing Oregon's largest school district. In addition, I will make it a priority in the next legislative session to bring forward a full review of the extent to which lead contamination occurs in Oregon schools water supply and, if indicated, require mandatory school testing similar to the school radon testing bill that I co-sponsored in 2015.

Sincerely,

Knute Buehler  
State Representative  
House District 54