

Summary of April 20th High School Design Meeting

On Monday evening, April 20th Portland Public Schools held the first community meeting to discuss and get feedback on the three “Big Ideas for Better High Schools.” Invitees included a mix of school leaders, including parents, local school foundations, site councils, LSACs, boosters, PTAs, CPPS, Stand for Children, CEE and CEP members.

Approximately 70 community members attended the meeting at Wilson High School, participating in facilitated discussions in ten groups of 5–9 people each. Planning, materials and facilitation of the meetings was supported by a Gates Foundation grant.

The following comments and questions were raised during the “reporting back” session of the meeting after the groups discussed each model in depth:

COMMENTS

- No open enrollment for 9th and 10th grade
- Large high schools with lots of resources will likely work best
- The central issue is equity across the district
- Some options are not developmentally appropriate for all students
- Keep it simple
- Strong focus on career pathways
- Personal attention, rigorous curriculum and relevant education are most important
- 9th and 10th grade should be a neighborhood experience, while 11th and 12th grade should be themes beyond what’s available at the neighborhood school
- Need for a rigorous, high quality plan for implementation that keeps promises
- The large school is the conditional catalyst for change
- Neighborhood schools are good
- Diversity and equity are important
- Be practical
- Ensure kids have a strong experience in 9th and 10th grade

QUESTIONS

- What closures will we have?
- What’s going to change?
- Do all these options necessitate a change in boundaries?
- Which plan makes the best use of available resources?
- How do we make strong smaller schools?
- How are these models cost effective?

- Where are the boundaries going to be drawn? How does that impact race and class at each school?
- How do we ensure there are programs and structures in place to teach students from diverse backgrounds?
- Where is the money?
- Is the city ready for change?

GENERAL MEETING FEEDBACK

At the end of the meeting, each participant was given an open-ended meeting evaluation form. About one-third of the evaluation forms were submitted. Following are summarized comments and illustrative quotes from these evaluations:

- Participants were happy with the overall format and materials:
 - Event was well-organized
 - Discussion group size was appropriate
 - Materials were clean and clear
 - Open format allowed for the tables to discuss at their own pace
 - Facilitators did a good job of guiding the discussion
 - Liked addressing each big idea separately
 - Appreciated “private think time” before each discussion
 - Liked seeing the comments on screen at the end
- Suggested improvements include:
 - Could offer chance to discuss other models and ideas
 - One question/one comment was too limiting
 - Allow more time at the end to discuss the three models together and prepare for reporting out
- Participants also wanted more in-depth information:
 - Videos could have gone a little deeper into the consequences of each model
 - Need more opportunities to ask questions of district experts as they roam around the room (could provide a clear structure for this to avoid some feeling that the roamers were hovering too much)
 - Some frustration with “sky high” theory without tying it to specific schools, resources or geography
- Participants called for PPS to reach out to all parents and students in the district with specific attention to families of color and low-income families.

- Participants appreciated having Carole and board members at the meeting to listen.

"I thought I might just pop in, but this seemed too important and too worthwhile to leave."

"I really appreciate the time district staff and school board are devoting to these meetings. It's impressive and indicates a genuine desire to listen."

"We hope the district will have the courage to make very difficult and possibly unpopular decisions. It will be impossible to make the best decision for our students through consensus. It is great to get community input, but our school board and superintendant need to be bold and focused to move us ahead."