



## Portland Public Schools

Superintendent Carole Smith's Speech to the City Club of Portland  
September. 5, 2008

*(These are the Superintendent's prepared remarks, and do not capture her extemporaneous additions to the speech as delivered.)*

Good afternoon. I want to thank the City Club for the opportunity to be with you today.

I am pleased to welcome so many of our civic leaders — legislators, the mayor and city commissioners, county chair and commissioners, leaders from our business and community organizations, and Portland Public School students, parents, school board and staff members.

I want to ask each of our high school principals to stand up. I am going to talk today about our high school system, and want to acknowledge these folks who have one of the toughest jobs in America. Help me thank them for all that they do for kids in our city.

*Our* collective commitment is vital to our students' success.

In the last year, Portland Public Schools has pushed forward on many initiatives to improve education for our students. We've provided each of you with a progress report that highlights some of those accomplishments.

There is much good news, including a few announcements from just the last couple of weeks:

- More than 70-percent of our schools met all standards under the No Child Left Behind Law — higher than the typical Oregon district.
- Our seniors' SAT scores are rising, and once again exceeded both state and national averages.
- Over the last few years, more of our students are meeting state achievement benchmarks in reading, math and writing. Our gains have been consistently strong in our elementary and middle grades.

However, and this is the big however, over the last four years, our high school test scores have remained rather flat.

Which leads me to today's topic:

I want to focus our attention — and our future energies — on the most urgent challenge facing our school district and perhaps our city: *building a high school system that truly meets the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.*

First I'd like to put us in the right frame of mind to consider this challenge: *Why are we focusing on reforming our high schools, anyway?*

Imagine for a moment that it's the year 2000, and that you are freshmen entering high school: the class of 2004.

You've had an interesting ride in Portland Public Schools. Oregon voters passed Measure 5 when you were in preschool. At first, not much changed. But as the property tax rates were lowered, and more of Portland's tax money was equalized to help students across the state, the changes became readily apparent.

You lost your art program, you lost your music teacher. You got less PE, and dog-eared novels in language arts. The social studies text book in middle school still had a chapter on the Soviet Union.

At the same time, you've had fabulous teachers — teachers you were really attached to. Teachers who inspired you, and who *you* still drop by to see occasionally.

Now you're in high school — the culmination of your Portland Public Schools education. I'd like to ask you all to please stand up. I'm going to lead you, the class of 2004, up to the present by the numbers.

Here we are — entering ninth grade, all standing.

By June of 2004, your high school graduation day, more than 40-percent of you are gone. (At your table of 10: Four of you please sit down.)

Most of you dropped out, and are now working hard to make ends meet at low-wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement. That is, those of you who were lucky enough to find those jobs.

Congratulations to the 54-percent of you who received that diploma over four years, and another three-percent who completed in five years.

However, after graduating from high school, less than two-thirds of you went on to community college or a university. (Another two please sit down.)

Finally, how many of you will actually complete your studies and earn a degree — an associate's or bachelor's?

Many of the class of 2004 are still in school. But if history is any guide, one-third of them will drop out of college before earning either a two-year associate's degree *or* a bachelor's degree. Would two more of you sit down?

Of 10 students who started high school in the year 2000, we expect just over two to end up with a college or community college degree.

Look around.

This is *our* current “brutal truth” — and the brutal truth in every other American city. Portland Public Schools may have company in this challenge — but that doesn’t make action any less urgent.

Take one more look around. Two of 10 left standing: It is a powerful visual that lets us know we can and *must* do better for the young people of our community.

You are welcome to sit. Thank you all for helping me to provide that visual.

Before I continue, let me say this is *not* just a challenge for *some* of our high schools or *some* of our students in *some* parts of the city. This is a challenge for all of us citywide.

Even at our high schools that are considered to be among the most successful in the state — those with lower dropout rates, and higher numbers of students heading to college — not much more than half of the entering class of ninth-graders will end up earning a college degree within six years of their high school graduation.

I will venture that the vast majority of you — if you have children — would *want* them to have the *opportunity* to earn a college degree.

Is that too much to hope for *all* of the children in this city? That our public schools would open doors to opportunities and make all things possible for all of them.

It’s not happening now. For our students, our families, our neighborhoods, our local economy and our city’s future — we absolutely *must* do better.

Our students are entering a world that is far different from the one that existed in the 1920s or 1950s, when our high schools were built. The Leaders Roundtable here in Portland recently prepared a report that summarized the situation quite well:

In the past, at workplaces, a select few were the leaders: some employees provided professional services and everyone else took direction. Job security was assumed in exchange for loyalty and hard work. Employees stayed with an employer for a long time — perhaps even a whole career.

*Times have changed.*

In the workplaces of our future, everyone must be skilled, everyone must make decisions and everyone must take responsibility. Work is often done in teams, and high-wage jobs go only to those with knowledge and skills. No job is secure, and workers have many employers and, often, more than one career, requiring constant education and retooling.

In the past, high schools were never intended to graduate every student, or to prepare every student for college. The goal then was to prepare the brightest for college to train for leadership, management and a professional career.

The rest of the students?

They were prepared to go directly into the work force. Students might find well-paid work on a factory assembly line, in a mill, a trade union or service job. Many young women were discouraged from pursuing college or careers at all — they might hold a job, but many were expected to raise a family and perhaps rely on a husband to support the family on a single income.

Again, those days are gone.

The high schools of our city's future *must assume* that everyone is and should be prepared for further education of some kind — whether they want to go to college immediately or not, we want that to be an option.

High schools *must* give all students the skills they need to meet the demanding requirements of college, the workplace and citizenship. College ready and work ready are one and the same. The old debate about whether every student will go to college? We want that to be an option as they're figuring out their future for themselves.

Together, we can — and *must* — remake our high schools for this, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Portland schools have spent the last decade fighting for funding, dodging budget blows and scraping together the means of survival. Our families, staff, students and the community have done a truly remarkable job of maintaining strong schools as we lurched from crisis to crisis, ballot measure to budget cut.

I want to take a moment now to thank each and every one of you for offering your time, energy, blood, sweat, tears, creativity, and resourcefulness to the children of this community over so many years.

Thanks to your efforts, we have now entered a period of relative — if still inadequate and fragile — budget stability. We have the opportunity to concentrate our full focus on our true mission: making sure every student in every zip code is prepared to succeed.

This is our time. This is our challenge — and this is our window of opportunity.

We must focus on what it will take to prepare our students to take their rightful place as citizens of our city. However, the responsibility for delivering results is not for our high schools to bear alone.

This is about making sure that our students are ready for high school, *and* that our high schools are ready for them. How will we make sure that are students are ready for high school?

Nobody wins an Olympic medal without years and years of hard work and training. Nobody runs for president without spending years building a record and leadership skills. And nobody graduates with a diploma primed for success without spending many years of academic work and commitment.

Ultimately, we want our students to be prepared to leave us — to graduate from high school prepared to take full advantage of postsecondary education and career opportunities.

From the time a student enters our school doors at the age of four or five, we must make sure they are on the path to graduation — and a strong future.

We are identifying key milestones from Pre-K through 12th grade — that serve as critical checkpoints and strong indicators of whether a student is indeed prepared to be successful at the next level.

These are the places where we will prioritize additional academic support for students who need it. These are the places we will strategically align our community and business partnerships — to work with us to give students the extra boost they need.

- Are they ready to read by the time they enter first grade?
- As they leave third grade, are they reading fluently enough to understand the information and ideas presented — do they have literacy skills that will form a strong foundation for the rest of their schooling?
- Are their math skills solid so they are on track to take — and pass — Algebra by ninth grade?
- By the end of ninth grade, have they passed their core classes and earned the full complement of ninth grade credit to be on track for graduation?

Our own data tells us that students who are on track at the end of ninth grade are *five times more likely to graduate* four years later.

When students fall behind, doors of opportunity quietly swing closed, shutting off their options. As a community, we need to commit to keeping those doors open for every student, every step of the way.

This summer, I visited Rosa Parks School, where we were running a summer academy for kindergarten and first grade students. Charles, an eager six-year-old, happily chattered away with me, showing me his writing, reading from a board, showing me all he had learned in the five weeks of summer classes.

His teacher later pulled me aside. Charles had started the summer with no confidence in his reading *or* writing. Pulling his hoody over his head, he would hide under the desk, fooling around on the floor to avoid his work.

With a strong curriculum and concentrated attention from his summer academy teachers, he is now eager to start first grade; ready to read, and excited for the first time in his life to be a *student*.

Imagine the confidence with which he will start school in the fall. Imagine the difference that will make in the rest of his schooling; Imagine the difference that will make in his life.

Over the last two summers, more than 700 kindergarteners and first-graders have reached and exceeded benchmarks, through our innovative early learners' summer academy. These are students who were struggling, perhaps never really expected to catch up with their peers. But with high expectations and the right support, they thrive. We also know that they are able to maintain those gains through the school year.

The NIKE School Innovation Fund partnered with Portland Public Schools to provide support to students at this key milestone, meeting the district “at its edges,” and making a difference in the lives of hundreds of our students.

Other partners have stepped up for Portland students at another critical stage of their schooling: the transition into high school.

We must be sure that each year we have truly prepared the entering class of ninth-graders for high school.

This year, each of our high schools knew the name of every student who had not already met eighth grade benchmarks prior to entering high school.

Each high school had a strategy to pay attention to — and support — those “academic priority” students as they made their way through ninth grade; to notice when they were struggling, and to move in closer.

Personal attention makes an enormous difference.

At Cleveland High School, each of these academic priority ninth-graders was assigned an adult mentor — one of the teachers, counselors, administrators or other staff at the school.

Eric was assigned to Paul Cook, the principal. Eric was a good athlete, but he was acting up: disrupting classes, starting to fail his courses and drifting away from school.

Paul met with Eric's parents, coaches and teachers. He checked in on Eric on a daily basis — catching him in the halls, asking how he was doing, getting e-mailed updates and progress reports from his teachers.

The relationship took off, and soon Eric was stopping *Paul* in the hallways, asking for advice and sharing his latest news.

And the news got better and better: Eric was turning in his work and earning better grades. He passed all of his classes with A's and B's and is heading into his sophomore year.

That is the difference that one adult can make in the life of a child.

Students like Eric need additional guidance and attention to succeed, and *students like Eric attend every one of our schools.*

This intensive, personalized strategy produced powerful results: the number of students at Cleveland who completed the ninth grade with the full complement of credits increased by 27-percent this year.

And for the first time in recent memory, all of last year's ninth-graders returned to start their sophomore year this week. 100 of the incoming ninth-graders are being matched with mentors.

This is a powerful strategy — with enormous impact.

Remember that students completing the ninth grade on track with their credits are *five times more likely to graduate than their peers.*

What if we, as a community, were able to find tuition support for every ninth-grader who did not pass a core course to take it during the summer — so that each of them return in 10<sup>th</sup> grade on track?

That would be a powerful statement about a community that supports the success of every student.

Connected by 25 — a coalition led by the Portland Schools Foundation that includes the City of Portland, Multnomah County, Worksystems, Inc., Portland Public Schools and 50 community based organizations — is partnering with Portland Public Schools to focus attention on this critical juncture with the “Ninth Grade Counts” initiative.

Through tutoring, mentorships, summer programs and after-school support, the Connected by 25 partners are collaborating with school staff to support students to enter ninth grade fully prepared, and to complete it successfully. Connected by 25 has also been expanding to include all five districts that serve the City of Portland.

Again — we are working to strategically align our partnerships and supports for students in the places we believe will have the highest impact on student success at the next level.

This is about making sure that our students are ready for high school, *and* that our high schools are ready for our students.

How will we make sure that our high schools are ready for them?

As Portland considers redesigning our high school system, it is not about the performance of individual schools — not about good schools or bad schools.

This is about the high school system we — as adults — have created to educate our children. It is about honoring our commitment to have a place that both fully challenges and supports *every one* of our students, and that we as adults are committing to meet them where they need to be met.

And as we contemplate changes, every reform must be weighed against four guiding principles:

1. Will the change help *all* students achieve at the highest levels?
2. Will it bring greater equity in student achievement — in other words, will a student's race, ethnicity and family income no longer predict their academic performance?
3. Will the change mean more students have greater access to our diverse high school programs?
4. Is it sustainable and is it flexible? Can Portland Public Schools financially maintain the highest quality programs now and for future generations?

Student achievement first — with equity, access and sustainability.

If those are the guiding principles, what is the current state of our high schools? The last decade of budget cuts have not been kind.

Every one of our high schools has been forced to make painful choices — cutting teaching jobs, reducing electives and resourcefully eking out the means to preserve whatever programs they could.

Over a 15 year period, the central office — increasingly starved for funding — eliminated our curriculum department and slashed support for schools, leaving each school to fend for itself.

*We have had a collection of high schools, not a high school system.*

We have an amazing corps of teachers and strong principals. With increasingly limited central direction and support, many became entrepreneurs of education — developing their own curriculum and innovating new ways to reach and teach students.

Teachers like Doug Winn, who developed a civil rights curriculum and led students on trips to Selma, Alabama.

Teachers like Jason Owens, who has almost single handedly revived the band program at Madison.

Or Jill Semlick, whose ecology students trap northern flying squirrels on Mount Hood, collect and analyze data, and report findings to the federal forest managers.

These teachers are great examples of the strengths we have to build on: they demonstrate amazing creativity in providing opportunities that both challenge and support our students and help them to thrive.

But the downside of such decentralization is also clear: inconsistent and uneven course offerings, and significant inequities across our system.

As we design a high school system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our challenge is to both build on those strengths *and* build consistent quality across our system.

How are we doing this?

First, by the end of this school year, we will define the core educational program to be offered at each of our high school campuses, as well as a plan to fund it within existing resources.

This means that every student must have access to foundational, or core, high school classes. This may sound so simple, but we're not there yet. This is the first, important, step toward ensuring equity across our system.

It also means that all students, at every school, have access to programs that can earn them college credit. That may be through dual credit programs in partnership with our local colleges, International Baccalaureate or Advanced Placement. No matter which program, every student must have the chance to get a head start into college.

Second, we will also define program offerings that might be different or unique: those things we will offer as a system, but not at every campus.

For programs that are unique or specialized, the critical factor becomes student access to those programs. Who can get into the program, by neighborhood assignment or by transfer? Where are the programs located, and how can students get there?

Here I want to recognize another partnership — one that's all about access. This fall, for the first, time, TriMet and the City of Portland are stepping up to make sure all students at Jefferson and Franklin High Schools receive annual transit passes. If the pilot program goes well, we may expand to cover all Portland high school students. Think of

the new opportunities that will open up for our students! Thank you, TriMet, Mayor Potter and the Multnomah Youth Commission for championing this program.

Third, continue to look for the best-fit strategy for every student — refining our portfolio or variety of school options that are designed to meet the different needs of different students.

Portland has developed an amazing array of programs over the last 30 years — some that are operated by the district and some that are operated in partnership with a host of community partners. These include comprehensive high schools, small schools, alternative schools, charter schools and residential treatment programs that are run by community based organizations and have school programs staffed by Portland Public Schools.

As we consider the core program and opportunities for students, we are taking a hard look at our entire portfolio. We are looking for equity of expectation, opportunity and outcome — regardless of what *type* of school a student may attend.

For example, our high school reforms over the last five years have split some large and troubled high schools into smaller learning communities, or small schools.

This restructuring has been a success on many levels: with students making a much stronger connection to their teachers and school, real gains in achievement scores, and this last year, some significant improvement in the stubbornly low graduation rates.

We are now seeking the optimal size of “small” for our system: a size that both allows us to offer the personalized, intensive, theme-focused education that has proved successful for many of our students, *and* maximizes our use of limited staffing and resources so that we are able to operate efficiently and effectively and support a strong range of course offerings for all students.

Fourth: Once we have defined our core educational program, and the means to provide it consistently across our system, we must go deeper.

Over the next two years we will also focus more intensive energy on our “Career Pathways” programs — those courses and experiences that allow students to explore their career interests by fusing relevant, career-focused education with college preparatory academic rigor.

We have a variety of creative and interesting electives for our high school students — but each class shouldn’t just be a one-off. Students should take what they learn about civil rights, jazz standards or flying squirrels and go deeper, and take other classes to explore the arts, environmental engineering or public policy.

Career Pathways builds on our current curriculum. It is learning by tinkering, designing, problem-solving, building, drawing and experiencing — and — by reading, writing and doing the math it takes to make a project happen.

It is also about developing the interpersonal and teamwork skills necessary to succeed in real life.

Our students need to graduate understanding the importance of showing up on time, dressing professionally and working effectively as a member of a diverse team.

And I am not shy to say we will continue to need help from our partners in higher education and among local employers to keep building stronger Career Pathways programs.

Partnerships like we have with the Portland Workforce Alliance, the Carpenters Union, and 14 general contractors where students from eight high schools participated in “Summer Construction Camp” the last two years. These students spent eight weeks learning about the construction industry working with a Journeyman Carpenter and earned over \$3,200.

Through job shadows, internships, real world problem solving and community service, you can help us develop experiences that will better prepare our students for the workplace and for life.

Students spending time in hospital labs, working alongside engineers and electricians, rehearsing with professional dancers or actors or musicians — there are endless possibilities and we need to focus and deepen our work.

Fifth, underpinning it all is the work that we as a district will continue to do to strengthen our instructional core:

- Building on a newly adopted set of academic standards for every student K through 12, and on a rigorous curriculum, including materials purchased through local option funding.
- We will continue to increase the capacity of principals as instructional leaders, the capacity of teachers to provide effective instruction and to effectively engage students and families in their learning.

Finally, I want to talk about our high school buildings. Everyone keeps asking me: ‘When are you closing a high school, and which one?’

Sometimes the question is asked out of fear and anxiety, sometimes the question is asked with varying degrees of impatience.

I am well aware that Portland Public Schools has not closed a high school for 24 years, even as our high school enrollment has dropped by another 2,000 students in the last 12 years.

But I'm not proposing that we close *any* high school campus.

Why not? There are at least three main reasons:

- 1) If we are successful in winning support from our community for a capital levy to repair, renovate and rebuild our schools, we are going to need the space. Full modernization of a high school, or building an entirely new school, takes more than a summer. We will need every bit of "extra" space in our high school system as swing space, so that we can shut down part or all of a high school for a year while it is rebuilt or remodeled.

In the Seattle Public Schools, students from Garfield High spent the last two years in the old Lincoln building, while their school was renovated top to bottom. This year, a middle school will move into the swing space while its building is modernized. Swing space is critical.

- 2) Portland's demographics are changing. Last year we had 13,500 high school students, and that number will drop again slightly this fall. But our enrollment in the youngest elementary grades is starting to rebound, and we expect that growth to hit our high schools by the end of the next decade. As the city embarks on developing the Portland Plan — one key data point is that the Portland metro area can expect another million residents — perhaps as many as 300,000 within the city by 2040. We need to be prepared.
- 3) Finally, our high school campuses with the lowest enrollment — the ones usually suggested for closure — each have at least 1,400 high school age students living in their neighborhoods. As a city, we have a choice: We can declare defeat, shut down those campuses and tell 1,400 students they have to take a long bus ride every day to a high school in a more affluent part of town — sacrificing their ability to participate in athletics, after-school activities or even hold a part-time job. Or we can work harder to provide programs at those schools that meet families' needs and are attractive to students.

I'm not ready to give up on those schools and on those neighborhoods.

I have seen no evidence that we will be able to effectively improve student achievement or graduation rates by shutting a building. "Shrinking the high school footprint" does not solve our problems — in fact, I believe a major campus closure right now would divert our attention and disrupt our progress.

That is *not* to say that I am tied to maintaining our existing programs exactly where they are for the long haul.

We may have exciting opportunities to co-locate programs in a shared space with a business or community partner. We will need to think outside the high school “box” about what a school should look like.

*Imagine a performing arts high school located with a community center and theater, with stages, rehearsal rooms, classrooms and technology in use seven days a week, all year round.*

*Imagine a business and entrepreneurship high school sharing technology and space with a community college and business partners, allowing students to incubate their own small businesses.*

*Imagine a health sciences and technology high school in partnership with a hospital, where students can shadow nurses on rounds or gain real experience working in labs.*

*Imagine a high school that harnesses the talents of Portland’s green technology and sustainable design community to develop and mentor the next generation of leaders in this field.*

These are not just dreams: they are examples of creative high school models that are succeeding in other American cities. With the right partnerships, we can make it happen right here in Portland.

Over the next two years, we will develop a long-range plan for our high school facilities — and we will develop it together. You have already been invited to discussions about the state of our buildings — now our challenge is to design the educational program and develop a facilities plan to deliver on the promise of that education.

The challenge of high school reform is not about how many buildings we operate. It’s about creating an environment and support for the magic that happens when you combine a ready student, a talented teacher and challenging academic content.

It is about an educational vision that better prepares our students to be responsible citizens and to lead productive lives in a changing world. This is not about re-inventing a high school system from scratch — it is about reforming and rebuilding our school system based on what our students need, and on what the 21<sup>st</sup> century will demand of them.

There are no easy answers. There may be controversy and disruption along with the excitement and progress. But how we respond to these challenges in the next two years will shape the future of Portland Public Schools and Portland itself — for generations to come.

Will our schools fail to prepare students for college and life because we lack the vision and resources to provide what our children need for their future — and ours?

*or*

Will we have high-performing schools that deliver a strong personalized education for each student to help them learn the skills they need?

Will Portland's energy begin to wane, because we could not sustain our support for our schools or produce a skilled workforce, and our neighborhoods and our businesses declined as a result?

*or*

Will Portland continue to attract new residents, grow new businesses and maintain an unbeatable quality of life because it supports good schools and vibrant, thriving neighborhoods?

Portland is not unique in these challenges.

Where I believe we *are* unique is in our strengths: our ability to examine our practice without flinching, to think creatively, to find solutions and pull together as a community to build our future.

When I think of high school reform, I know we can learn from other urban school districts' experiences.

But let me tell you, there is no city in this country that has a better opportunity than Portland to meet this challenge head on. If anyone can become a model for the nation, we can.

In the coming 12 months you can expect that we will call upon you to help us meet this challenge. We will be developing and sharing with you a clear articulation of the opportunities we must provide every student to move to success at the next level. And will need you to help us harness the resources necessary to ensure we can deliver these opportunities in alignment with our guiding principles: student achievement first — with equity, access and sustainability.

So as you leave here today, I want you to leave with three takeaways:

1. We currently do not have a high school system that meets the needs of every student — and every student, in every zip code, suffers because of this.
2. Now is the moment to make a difference. The challenge is clear, the need is great, the opportunities are present. We have a crucial window and must take advantage of it. One day's opportunity can be the next day's crisis.
3. As a school district, we cannot do this alone. Creating a system of schools to meet the needs of the students of today and tomorrow is an opportunity, and a

challenge, that will require the talents, resources, and creativity of each and every one of us.

Portland Public Schools educates more than 46,000 youth in this community. They will shape our lives as much as we shape theirs — and it's in all of our interest to help them succeed.

Thank you for joining me here today, and thank you for joining me in this vital work.

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*For more information on the high school system design work, go to [www.ohs.pps.k12.or.us](http://www.ohs.pps.k12.or.us), or contact us at [highschools@pps.k12.or.us](mailto:highschools@pps.k12.or.us) or 503-916-3304. Portland Public Schools is an equal opportunity employer and educator.*