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MEMORANDUM

To: Sarah Singer, Portland Public Schools
Cc: Robb Cowie, Sarah Ames, Zeke Smith, John Wilhelmi and Toni Hunter
From: Tripp Somerville and Anne Ozols
Date: May 20, 2009
Re: Big Ideas community engagement findings summary

OVERVIEW

From April 20 to May 16th, Pyramid and PPS held a series of large, public community meetings and smaller stakeholder engagement sessions. The first three community meetings (held at Wilson, Franklin and Madison high schools) focused on gathering feedback on the three *Big Ideas for Better High Schools*: Neighborhood High Schools with Flagship Magnets, Special Focus Campuses and Regional Flex Network of Schools. The final community meeting, held at Jefferson, asked participants to delve deeper into the high school redesign, focusing particularly on the demands and dimensions of equity and identifying the building blocks of alternative Big Ideas.

In addition to the four community meetings, Pyramid and PPS held four engagement sessions with community groups across Portland: NAYA Youth Services, Portland Indian Leaders Roundtable (PILR), Coalition for Education Excellence (CEE), Community and Parents for Public Schools (CPPS) and Stand for Children. In each meeting, we explored the Big Ideas and focused on developing relationships for an ongoing dialogue on the high school redesign. Pyramid and PPS also reached out to the Latino Network and the African American Alliance for similar sessions.

OVERARCHING THEMES

Throughout the community engagement meetings, we collected feedback in a variety of ways, including note taking at the meetings, individual feedback forms and facilitator notes that captured themes at each table.

Seven themes rose to the top:

- **Acknowledge the history of distrust.** A history of distrust with PPS was especially apparent among the people of color engaged in these discussions. PPS was encouraged to recognize the complicated past and to make a more concerted effort to put more visibility on race, equity and how students can succeed in the system. The message is clear: serve those students that are not being served well now.
- **There is no one-size-fits-all solution.** While there were aspects of the Big Ideas that resonated with community members, they repeatedly noted that PPS must provide a system that offers flexibility for the full array of students and families within the district.
- **A comprehensive K-12 strategy is needed.** The high school challenge cannot be isolated to high schools alone; it is a system-wide problem. Often, the community

interpreted the redesign's focus on high schools as an abandoning of the complete implementation of the K-8 strategy. They urged PPS to integrate high school decisions about curriculum, programs and boundaries with those of elementary and middle schools.

- **Long-term commitment from PPS and the community is critical.** Using the K-8 implementation reference point, many community members noted that PPS should slow down to ensure change doesn't come too quickly and without the buy-in necessary to ensure long-term commitment and sustainability. Overall, families want the least disruptive transition for their children into the new system. PPS needs to be responsive even after the start of implementation to ensure that the new system continues to meet community needs. Stakeholder groups, in particular, identified themselves as strategic partners in the ongoing outreach to specific communities.
- **High quality teachers and strong student-teacher relationships are key to student success.** Community members struggled to consider structure without discussions on high quality teachers. Strong relationships with high quality teachers were repeatedly mentioned as the most effective factor to ensure students graduate and succeed in life. Good teaching and relationships should also build upon a core of cultural competency and a more diverse staff.
- **Equity does not mean equal, but it does need to be defined.** Equity of programs and course offerings should be at the core of the new system design, but the definition of "equity" needs to be clearly defined and schools should be held to that standard. Community members also noted that equity will not look the same at every school.
- **Community building should be at the core of any new system.** PPS should create schools that serve the entire community. Community members, especially community groups representing communities of color, urged PPS to include targeted community engagement and community building as part of any structure that is implemented, whether it's neighborhood schools or something else.

While parents and community leaders made up the majority of those in attendance at the large community meetings, at least 50 students participated in the sessions. These student voices were vital to the conversation, in many ways providing a unique perspective, while also echoing particular overall themes.

Three themes were most prominent among students:

- **Students want the flexibility to follow programs.** Recognizing the inequities in the current system, many students underscored the importance of being able to transfer to other schools to access programs and courses that are interesting to them. They also mentioned the necessity of transferring for more convenient transportation or to access specific extracurricular activities.
- **Students have no particular allegiance to neighborhood schools.** While many adults advocated for neighborhood schools, students thought they should not be tied to their neighborhood school if there were better options for them elsewhere. Even those who advocated for students to "try" their neighborhood schools first did not think strict transfer policies were the best option.
- **Relationships with high quality teachers motivate students to succeed.** Students echoed the thoughts of other community members in talking about the importance of relationships to their success in school. Many students emphasized the success of small schools in this realm.

THE BIG IDEAS

Each meeting gathered specific feedback on the three Big Ideas. Below are the central pros and cons that were common across all Big Ideas conversations (central themes specific to each big idea are included in an addendum to this document):

PROS

- **Personalization:** Small class sizes and personalized academies help keep students on track, especially during the transition into high school. Student-teacher relationships are the foundation for a good education.
- **Large school size:** Large schools maximize resources and achieve the “critical mass” necessary to offer a broad array of opportunities for students.
- **Breadth of options:** Increased choice with age and maturity and a rich diversity of programs and extracurricular activities at all schools are positives. Students should be able to experiment with different options without having to switch campuses.
- **Community connections:** Tying curriculum to real-world careers in the community and hands-on experiences helps keep students engaged. Campuses should have a built-in community network and partnerships with community organizations.
- **Neighborhood-based:** Neighborhood schools foster community ownership and school pride. Families are more likely to be aware of options closer to their home.
- **Equity:** Core curriculum and offerings across campuses help eliminate glaring differences in the current system.

CONS

- **High-demand schools:** Any system that creates false demand for schools, such as magnets or specialized programs in the Special Focus Campuses model, are viewed skeptically. If students don’t get into the best magnets, then they may flee to private schools and parents may still “cheat the system” to get their child into the school they want. Aggressive outreach for special programs will be needed so that all students have the same access.
- **Travel/transportation:** Students should not have to travel far to go to school, whether it’s to attend a magnet, access a special program in the Regional Flex model, or go to a neighborhood school that is farther away due to school closures. Increased travel is especially challenging for at-risk students and students with disabilities.
- **Limiting program options:** Choosing a specific theme for 11th and 12th grade, or having 9th and 10th grade academies could be too limiting for students. Programs should recognize cross-disciplinary interests and provide flexibility for students who want a “liberal-arts” education as well as those who want to specialize.

ADDENDUM: THE BIG IDEAS

Below are pros, cons and key questions specific to each Big Idea based on feedback gathered at community meetings and stakeholder engagement sessions.

SPECIAL FOCUS CAMPUSES

PROS

- **Personalization:** Personalized academies help keep all students on track, especially during the transition into high school.
- **Large school size:** School size is large enough to provide lots of options and opportunities, provides good preparation for college, but still allow for the possibility to build smaller communities within a larger school.
- **Hands-on opportunities:** Tying curriculum to real-world careers and hands-on experiences help keep students engaged. Teachers can work together in teams to develop rigorous curriculum.
- **Community connections:** The campuses still have a connection to neighborhoods, with a built-in community network, including partnerships with community organizations.
- **Breadth of opportunities:** There is increased choice with age/maturity and a rich diversity of programs at all schools.
- **Equity:** There is a consistent 9th and 10th grade curriculum across the district that eliminates glaring differences between campuses.

CONS

- **Creates high-demand schools:** Limited options for juniors and seniors at their neighborhood school could potentially lead to more transfer problems for higher demand themes.
- **Travel:** Fewer campuses that are more physically spread out could mean students have to travel farther to get to their school.
- **Limiting program options:** Choosing a specific theme for 11th and 12th grade could be limiting for students. Students could also be too young to decide on a theme and will likely choose based on friendships, not on interests. 9th and 10th grade academies could be limiting for a student if they are TAG, don't like their teachers, etc. In general, the programs don't recognize cross-disciplinary interests and flexibility.
- **Diversity:** Diversity is not necessarily improved without a change in boundaries.
- **Large school size:** School size could be too large and at-risk kids may fall through the cracks or, at the very least, it may make it easier for kids to opt out of more challenging opportunities.
- **Academies:** Academies create a divided school that lacks the unifying aspects of a comprehensive high school.
- **Theme identification:** Special focus themes need to be chosen carefully with community input. There is a danger that the themes could be too vocational. Many suggested having a liberal arts theme.
- **Cost:** Might be too costly to implement.

KEY QUESTIONS

- How would kids learn about their theme options?
- Can kids transfer between campuses to increase program options?
- What is the geographic spread of the campuses?
- Can you change your focus in 12th grade?
- How would sports work in this model?

NEIGHBORHOOD HIGH SCHOOLS AND FLAGSHIP MAGNETS

PROS

- **In-depth programming:** Magnet options are offered for students who want to go deep in a specific subject.
- **Neighborhood-based:** Builds neighborhood ownership, a basis for school pride and community connections. Makes it easier for volunteers to be engaged. Keeps things local and lowers the carbon footprint.
- **Breadth of options:** Allows students to experiment without having to shift campuses. Offers a variety of courses and extracurricular activities.
- **Equity:** Having a core set of curriculum across schools helps ensure equity. There is peace of mind in knowing there is equal opportunity at all neighborhood schools.
- **Limited travel:** Students are at one place all day, which means student management and safety is more feasible than if students are travelling.
- **Larger school size:** Larger size and more students at each school means there are more resources to go around.

CONS

- **An outdated system:** Neighborhood schools feel like the system we have now, or the system we had 20 years ago, without the ability to transfer.
- **Equity:** Lack of confidence that we have or could maintain high quality at all schools. Also, this model doesn't address how much money parents in specific communities raise for their schools and how much privileged parents can/will be involved in certain schools.
- **Boundaries:** Diversity would not be accomplished unless boundaries were redrawn because the current neighborhoods are not seen as diverse.
- **Capture rate:** If students don't get into the best magnets, then they may flee to private schools.
- **Demand for magnets:** Limited spaces in magnets create false demand.
- **Career exploration:** This model is missing the dynamic job-share aspects of other models. We need to think broadly about post high-school success to include career pathways.
- **Travel to magnets:** Travel time across the city to get to magnet schools is a deterrent. Magnets should be distributed evenly across the city or be co-enrolled within schools to maximize budgets.
- **Depersonalization:** Big schools can depersonalize relationships between teachers and students.
- **System navigation:** Families may still move or "cheat the system" to get to the school they want. Aggressive outreach for magnets will be needed so it doesn't just attract the usual suspects.

KEY QUESTIONS

- How do we ensure that all schools meet the same standards of equity?
- Are students committed for years or could you move between a magnet and your neighborhood school?
- How does NCLB play into this idea? Is there an exception to attend neighborhood school if it doesn't meet AYP?
- What percent of kids can attend magnets?
- What happens to the existing language magnets?
- What happens to kids who have been in magnets for elementary or middle?
- How do we overcome the current school perception problems?

REGIONAL FLEX NETWORK OF SCHOOLS

PROS

- **Breadth of opportunities:** Allows kids to decide what works for them and addresses the fact that not all kids learn the same way. Internships, links to community colleges, availability of higher-level courses, and other credit options provide variety and flexibility. Encompasses small schools.
- **Equity:** The funding strategy is more equitable. Families more likely to be aware of options if closer to their home area.
- **Forward-looking:** An innovative format that looks very different from our schools today. Promotes independence and prepares kids for life.
- **Diversity:** Provides exposure to new neighborhoods. May promote empowered areas and more equality.

CONS

- **Structure:** Not enough structure for students. May require more parent involvement. In general, more support will be needed, including counselors, and it will put more pressure on teachers to ensure students are on track.
- **Transportation:** Transportation is challenging for both students and parents and could have an environmental impact. Tri-met is not convenient for all neighborhoods and students.
- **Time:** All schools in region would have to have the same bell schedule. Loss of time and opportunities for extracurricular activities. Travel could eat into instructional time.
- **Expense:** Sounds too expensive to implement.
- **Equity:** Doesn't solve the problem of certain schools still being more popular than others and perhaps receiving more support because of that. Lack of guarantee that kids will get into a school that meets their needs. Emphasizes already obvious regional segregation
- **Community:** Diminishes sense of community and relationships. Dismantles Portland's strong history and alumni allegiance
- **At-risk students:** This model would be toughest for at-risk students, including ELL students and students with disabilities. Would be more difficult for families who already have a hard time navigating the system and understanding their choices.

Questions

- How do parents/teachers keep track of students?
- How would we partner with charter schools?
- Where would the regional boundaries be drawn?
- How would sports work?
- Will there be responsiveness if there is clear demand or lack of demand for specific programs?
- How would foundation money be distributed?
- Would small/alternative options offer core academics?