



**Portland Public Schools Superintendent Carole Smith  
High School Model Endorsement  
Benson High School, June 24, 2009**

Last fall, as we started the school year, I told you my top priority was to improve our high school system to serve ALL students better.

We need to raise our graduation rate, make sure students are inspired and challenged by their high school classes, and truly engaged in school. And we must close the achievement gap.

I shared a stark reality with the City Club last fall, and it bears repeating: Our high schools are not preparing students for the lives they want to live — whether they plan to go to work or college after graduation.

Of all students who entered our high schools as part of the class of 2007, only 63 percent — less than two-thirds — graduated on time with their class; 37 percent left school. Some may have started up again in another school, another state, but most simply dropped out.

And what of the students who did persevere, earning enough credits and gaining diplomas? We all know students who put in their seat time, do enough work to pass their classes and earn a diploma — but who don't care about school and have no direction after graduation. They may be graduates, but are they well served?

Less than two-thirds of the class of 2007 went on to college — and if the past is indicative, most of them will struggle and drop out before earning their degrees. Are they well served by our high schools?

Not one of our current high schools is truly getting the results we want for ALL students — not even those schools considered most successful. There are problems we can't afford to ignore. To fix these problems, we need to strengthen our high school system as a whole.

For more than a year, a team of PPS staff has been analyzing data, reviewing student achievement research and talking to principals and teachers about how we can strengthen our high school system in Portland.

Since January, they have also been engaged in a deep and informative discussion with our community: listening to students and meeting with groups around the city. Thousands more community members and staff offered their thoughts through surveys, phone calls, e-mails and letters. And in the past two months, we have held meetings

that have attracted more than 500 people who offered their feedback on a set of “big ideas” for a better high school system, and who shared some big ideas of their own. More than 4,000 Portlanders have weighed in.

Some of these comments were hard to hear, but it was clear that our community shares a deep commitment to our high schools, a recognition that we need to take steps to improve them and a consensus that a successful high school system is important to Portland’s future.

We also heard a strong call for equity — that no matter what school they attend, where they live or what their family income, every student deserves an equal shot at a challenging high school education that meets his or her individual needs.

Let me give you an illustration of just how inequitable our current system is.

Imagine yourself at the corner of Southeast 57<sup>th</sup> and Duke, in the Brentwood-Darlington neighborhood. It’s an intersection like many others, with a church on the northwest corner and homes on the other corners — in this case, multi-family ranch-style housing.

Kids living at 57<sup>th</sup> and Duke all play for the same Little League teams, bicycle the same blocks, and roam the same parks. But they have vastly different high school opportunities and experiences.

## MARSHALL

If you’re a high school student living at the southeast corner of this intersection, you are assigned to the Marshall Campus, where you can choose one of three small schools. This year, 774 students attended Marshall schools — with roughly 200 to 300 at each of the small schools on campus. Students at Marshall have a highly personal education, making strong connections with teachers and fellow students, but they are forced to give up the wide range of courses offered at other schools.

Students at Marshall also arrive with greater needs than in other schools: Almost three-quarters qualify for free and reduced-price lunch based on their family income, almost one-in-five are English language learners, just about as many qualify for special education services, and 6 percent are identified as “Talented and Gifted.”

With that student mix, the Marshall schools must devote more of their limited staff and resources to helping students catch up and keep up — and less to the advanced college prep classes all schools should offer. In effect, that places a glass ceiling on the aspirations of high achieving students in that neighborhood.

## FRANKLIN

Let’s turn to the northeast corner of 57<sup>th</sup> and Duke. If you’re a student living here, you’re assigned to Franklin. Franklin is a strong and diverse school, with a wide range of programs. Few other schools offer so many Advanced Placement classes, succeed as well with their English language learners or offer such classes as forensic sciences, African-American History, Russian and Chinese and child development.

Of all PPS high schools, Franklin most closely reflects the districtwide student demographics: with 48 percent of students from lower-income homes, one-in-10 English language learners, 15 percent special education and 11 percent Talented and Gifted.

But with just over 1,000 students — down more than 450 in 10 years — Franklin struggles to maintain its range of rigorous offerings as its teaching ranks are reduced along with the student count.

## CLEVELAND

Cleveland is the assigned neighborhood school for students living on the southwest corner of the 57th and Duke intersection.

At more than 1,500 students — actually up by almost 300 over the last decade — Cleveland has the student numbers and staff to offer a wide range of classes and hosts an International Baccalaureate program, where teachers are trained in a rigorous curriculum recognized across the world.

Only a handful of students — about one in 25 — are English language learners, roughly 9 percent are in special education, a quarter come from lower-income homes, and, topping it off, one-quarter of its students qualify as Talented and Gifted.

Cleveland students, as a group, do very well. But despite all the apparent advantages, even Cleveland does not deliver the results we want for all students. Only about half of low-income Cleveland students, for example, meet state benchmarks for 10<sup>th</sup> grade this year – fewer than the year before. Low income students at Franklin and two of the three Marshall small schools did just about as well or significantly better.

And despite Cleveland's high graduation rate and the fact that more than 60 percent of students go on to college, many founder once in higher education. Less than 30 percent of the graduates earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years.

Even our highest performing schools can improve.

So from one intersection, PPS sends students to three different schools — with three very different sets of opportunities. This is not equity.

We can't change where Portlanders choose to live, so we know that there will always be differences among the student populations attending our schools as long as we draw attendance boundaries and assign students based on their addresses.

But let's be honest: Portland residential patterns alone do not explain the inequity in our system. Our decisions over the decades have created unequal opportunity and placed that glass ceiling over some of our students.

WE moved the attendance boundaries. WE established the transfer lottery and set the guidelines that have drained students from Marshall and Franklin. WE have allowed upper income and TAG families to concentrate at Cleveland, leaving students at Franklin and Marshall with greater shares of students in special education, those learning English and those from lower-income homes.

Although budget cuts limit the number of teachers we can hire, WE decided how to distribute them to schools. And WE have attempted one-off solutions, changing programs, creating small schools, even reconstituting an entire high school staff — firing and rehiring.

I believe these individual decisions were made with the best of intentions — but not with the best results.

For better results for our students, we can't just look at one or two high schools — we need to improve the entire system.

Here's why: Our schools are connected to each other, just as they are connected to our community. We need to do everything we can to make sure that each student here today has equitable access to a challenging and engaging high school experience, no matter what campus he or she attends. And we need to make sure that every school helps every student achieve to his or her full potential. We can't make that guarantee today.

I charged my high school design team with developing a model that will allow us to make that promise to every student. A model that will truly engage and inspire every high school student. A model that sets students up to succeed with high school programs and structures that support personalized learning and higher achievement for all. A model that ensures that not only do more students graduate, but that they graduate with the skills they need to succeed in college and workplace.

Based on research, the expertise of our teachers and principals and input from community groups and thousands of students, parents and community members, they have proposed a new model for Portland Public Schools high school system.

Today I am endorsing that model.

## **THE MODEL**

Our future high school system should have three main components:

Based on their address, every student will have a guaranteed place at his or her **community high school** — a true comprehensive school of 1,100 to 1,400 students that offers a consistent range of programs, including classes that can earn college credit, art, music, advanced math and four years of at least one world language. We envision six or seven community high schools, serving roughly two-thirds of all students. Because these community schools will have consistent programs, we will not allow transfers from one community school to another.

**Smaller magnet schools** — with between 300 and 1,100 students — will give students the chance to go deep in key interest areas, such as the arts or career technical education. They may also focus on different educational approaches capitalizing on their smaller size. The model envisions three to six magnet schools open to students district-wide, and located for the most convenient access on public transit.

**Alternative and charter schools** — which together we call “education options” — will provide additional choices for students by referral or charter lottery, as now. We will explore increasing online learning opportunities and allowing students to split their time among schools, to give more flexibility to meet student needs.

Under this model, every school — community school, magnet or alternative school — must make sure to offer personal attention to students, particularly 9<sup>th</sup>-graders, through 9<sup>th</sup>-grade academies, mentorships or other strategies.

This model is simple, elegant, equitable — and a lot of work.

A long series of decisions have led us to our current state, and now we must embark on a series of decisions and implementation steps to bring us to the new model. The changes will affect every high school campus, with the first actions taking effect in the fall of 2010.

I know that many Portlanders — justifiably — don’t really trust the school district to make significant changes. They’ve seen faulty implementation and have felt burned by rushed decision-making — whether your experience is with Jefferson High School or the K-8 reconfigurations.

Again, I think that decisions made in the urgency of the moment, with the best of intentions, yielded unintended consequences.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

I promise you that as we redesign our high school system, we will move deliberately, thoughtfully and openly in our planning and actions toward the new model.

We will have open discussions about locations of these community and magnet schools. We now have PPS high school programs on 10 large high school campuses, along with three separate sites that are home to Alliance High School, Metropolitan Learning Center and the Young Women’s Academy. With plans for six or seven community schools and three to six magnet schools, I expect we will continue to have high school programs at each of those sites. Some current neighborhood schools may become sites for magnets; some community schools may be located where we now have small schools; some existing small schools or magnet programs may be relocated; other magnet schools may be new start-ups using existing buildings. So while I do not expect any campus closures, the next several years will bring change.

I am asking my staff to pull together an advisory board of community members to help make recommendations on the location of our community schools and magnets — based on demographics, mass transit access and available sites.

I also am asking them to engage in deeper work to define the programs to be offered — both the consistent offerings at community schools, and the specialized programs to be offered in magnets. Some of our small schools may form the basis for a strong magnet, either for their educational theme or their personalized approach. I’d like to explore the option of creating a strong performing and visual arts magnet, and building on Benson

High School's strengths to create a magnet with a strong career-technical program. We also will engage with potential partners and students to learn more about what sparks their interest and where we might create some excitement and success.

And I will ask staff to work with my advisory committee on enrollment and transfer. Their charge? To lay out options to adjust our school choice and assignment policies and our attendance boundaries over time as we move toward the new model.

A word about transfers: We heard over and over — and the data confirm — that our current transfer system increases the inequity among schools, starving some schools of students and some students of opportunity. This model proposes not to allow transfers from one community school to another. I endorse that change, with this caveat: We cannot eliminate those transfers until we can assure students that the school serving their neighborhood indeed does measure up to our model of a community school — with consistent and strong courses, advanced classes and support for all.

## **RENOVATION AND REBUILDING**

Finally, I am asking my staff to bring forward, this fall, recommendations for a long-range capital improvement plan. We desperately need to renovate and rebuild our aging school buildings — and I will recommend that at least two, and as many as four, high school buildings be included in the first wave of improvements to be included in a capital bond measure put before voters next year.

Just over a year ago, we put our facilities planning on hold, so that we could plan a high school system. We wanted to ensure that our educational programs defined our building needs — and that we weren't rushing to build schools without a firm model for our future.

We now can move forward. Our high school buildings are, almost uniformly, in dire need of renovation. Their systems are old — clogged and leaking plumbing, leaky windows, poor heat and air circulation, damaged roofs and over-taxed electrical systems. New buildings would correct these problems. But they also provide a catalyst — indeed an essential support — as we move toward a better high school model.

A modernized school would encourage teachers to collaborate, with groupings of class spaces rather than a long hall of closed doors. They will allow students to work together in small groups and in hands-on projects, whether practicing a newly written play or designing a model for physics. They will have the technology our classrooms need in this multimedia 21<sup>st</sup> century world. And we can plan for our new high school buildings to bring our partners inside — truly making our schools welcoming to families and as community centers, creating hubs for innovation with educational partners, whether arts groups or employers contributing to creating real-world learning experiences for our youth.

To truly deliver on the promise of the new high school system model, our buildings must match our aspirations — raising the bar for our schools and our students.

## **SETTING STUDENTS UP FOR SUCCESS**

We know that the essence of education is the quality of teaching that goes on in every classroom and school. And we are working to support our teachers with the classroom materials, professional development and time they need to plan together and improve their instruction. But even the strongest teachers are more effective in schools that are thriving, in strong demand and have programs that engage students and support learning. That's how high school design can help — and how we hope this new model will deliver the results we need, for every student.

Today, I am endorsing a new model for our Portland high school system. Now we will set to work on all it will take to bring that new vision into reality. As a community, we have many decisions to make and changes to carry out . You will hear from me and my staff again in the coming months as we work through these issues.

And as all of us — community members, staff, students and families — move forward, I hope we all keep the core issue in mind: How important do you believe it is that Portland has a robust and equitable high school system, one that ensures that all of our students are ready to be productive and engaged citizens? And how much are you willing to invest to help that system of opportunity become a reality?

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