



## Investing in Student and Community Success: School Modernization

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Tonight I am presenting you with a proposal to invest in our students' success by providing learning environments that support our teachers to do their best work with our students, and that allow our students to do their best work and to be competitive as they enter college and careers.

That's what school modernization is all about. We must provide sound structures to house our schools – keeping students warm, safe and dry. We must also modernize classrooms, science labs, libraries and other school spaces, updating technology, equipment and furnishings, so that our PPS schools truly support today's best teaching and learning.

When I visit schools, you'll see energetic students and dedicated teachers. You'll also see worn out buildings. The average age of our schools is 65, and most have never been modernized.

**Our school buildings need a lot of work.**

Portland Public Schools' teachers and school staff now must try to fit modern teaching practices into antiquated buildings, improvising and making do.

- Students gather in crowded high school hallways to run through the script they are writing for English.
- Parent volunteers work with small reading groups in the corner of a cafeteria.
- Teachers demonstrate science experiments as students observe, because the class is not equipped to have students perform their own labs safely.
- Elementary teachers haul water in buckets from the bathrooms so their classes can work on art projects, because they don't have sinks in the classroom.
- Teachers and aides working with smaller groups of students – whether for English language development, special education support, or reading and math coaching – often share space or work in underused corners of the school that were built for storage.
- Students are frustrated when they can't get on the overbooked media center computers to conduct research, take their online classes or get their class work done.
- And teachers who have and use more recent technology have inadequate electrical outlets and must push around unwieldy carts for their projectors, computers and other gear.

Our school buildings must support effective education – rather than posing obstacles to overcome.

Those of you who have visited our school buildings recently know this. Over the last three years as superintendent, I can't tell you how many times graduates of our schools have told me about going back to their grade school or high school after decades away. They notice that it looks about the same – just a little more worn.

One Portland resident recently told us that he used to work for the state Board of Parole, and toured many state prisons. Now that his child is in our schools, he said, he's been visiting schools.

"The dichotomy between looking at the prisons and then the schools in Portland was just astounding to me," he said. "They were like day and night, with how nicely maintained and new the structures and construction for the prisons [were] and then you go to the schools and they're about to fall apart, with old equipment and everything. I think that if we bolster up the schools, then that will improve the education and you'll have less people going into the prisons."

That floored me. And as painful as the comparison is, it inspires me.

Our custodians do their best to keep our aged schools clean and functional for our students and staff – and they do a good job. And we have a central facilities team who do as much as they can with the minimal budget that is left to them. But for more than a decade we simply have not been able to dedicate the funding necessary to make the school building improvements that our students and staff deserve.

In 1990, voters shifted control of our local school district budgets to Salem. With property tax limits in place, the state in large part decides the PPS budget – and over the last 15 years we have repeatedly faced budget shortfalls, significant cuts and rarely stability.

In the same time, our total student enrollment has been dropping – by more than 7,000 students in the last decade. Portland Public Schools has been shrinking our footprint, closing a dozen neighborhood schools in the last decade and voting last month to close a high school. Those tough decisions are heart-wrenching for the neighborhoods, but necessary to concentrate our resources and staff so we can provide a strong educational program for students.

This school board and its predecessors have faced difficult choices. And when the choice is between putting money into our teaching staff or into our buildings, they have looked at the immediate impact on kids and funded teachers and educational programs every time.

Meanwhile, other districts have been renovating their old schools and building new facilities. West Linn/Wilsonville, Tigard-Tualatin, Beaverton, Lake Oswego, Canby, Parkrose, North Clackamas – all have newer school buildings that aim high in supporting student achievement. Seattle has been rebuilding its schools, and now is seeing enrollment jump as the modernized buildings attract more students.

Parents tell me of taking their kids to soccer games, debate competitions or student performances in other school districts. Looking in the windows, visiting a new school or simply enjoying the grounds, they know their kids are at a competitive disadvantage.

We must update and modernize our school buildings so that PPS students have the same technology, equipment and teaching approaches as students in schools with newer buildings.

I am excited tonight to present a proposal to deliver modern learning environments for all of our students – well-equipped, well-designed schools with the technology and spaces to support great teaching in every neighborhood.

Just over three years ago, we started to develop this plan, with a comprehensive survey of school conditions, operating systems and capacity issues. Over a number of workshops, community meetings and focus groups from 2007 through 2009, we also engaged thousands of members of our community in thinking with us about our vision and values for school buildings in Portland.

And then, a little more than a year ago, we put the conversation about our buildings on hold, as we went deep into our community discussions and debate about the future of our high school system. We are now ready again to move forward.

I am proposing a sensible financing plan that will allow us to rebuild our schools over 20 to 30 years, maintaining a level tax rate of about \$2 per thousand of assessed value. That's comparable to school rebuilding bonds in neighboring districts and will bring the advantages of better school buildings to all corners of our school district.

I propose that the Portland School Board put a measure on the May, 2011 ballot that allows Portlanders to invest in their school buildings – so that our teachers have the equipment, the environment and support to do their best work with our students and so that our schools help our students be competitive in college and career.

In this first phase, which will last six years, I propose to **rebuild eight schools**: Jefferson, Roosevelt and Cleveland high schools, and Marysville, Faubion, Laurelhurst, Rigler and Markham K-8 and elementary schools. We also will prepare a ninth, Lincoln High, to be ready for groundbreaking in the next phase of the bond program.

We will accountably and effectively manage those major school rebuilding projects within the next six years. Although almost all of our buildings have problems, those sites are the highest priority according to three main factors:

1. **Student impact.** We will provide rebuilt schools to affect as many students as possible, particularly at the grade levels where the educational environment is most out-dated compared to neighboring school districts.
2. **Facilities conditions.** We will address schools with high needs in each area of the district. Those buildings have urgent needs and significant deficiencies – in their conditions and configuration -- and will be rebuilt before those with lower needs.
3. **Geographic diversity.** We will share the rebuilding geographically across the district. This is important for equity, for the logistics of staging the construction, and so that every part of the school district sees modernization.

Second, schools not in the first phase to be rebuilt will also see great benefit under this plan. We will make **interim updates to improve learning environments** for students in many more schools:

- 38 middle and K-8 schools will receive updated science classrooms and technology upgrades.

- 33 schools will receive covered playground structures for outdoor physical education and recreational use.
- 6 high schools not being rebuilt will see improvements to support the rigorous common core program, and improvements to their grounds such as lighting, landscaping, signage and improvements to entrances and walkways.

Third, we will make **major one-time updates to school building systems** across the district.

- We will increase safety, updating fire alarm systems, replacing wooden playground equipment and improving access and security at entrances.
- We will increase accessibility for disabled students and adults and improve earthquake resistance, particularly in roofing projects.
- And we will improve building conditions by updating basic electrical, plumbing, heating and ventilation and mechanical systems.

Finally, we will be accountable, so that tax dollars are spent as promised. We know this is a significant ask of our community – and we will be directly accountable for managing this school modernization effort well.

Public oversight will be strong – both through the School Board’s Finance, Audit and Operations Committee and through the Citizens Budget Review Committee. In addition to citizen oversight, annual audits will review all spending and appropriations, and will be made available to the public, including regular project updates. To maintain the school district’s strong financial position, this bond package pays off existing debt and provides a significant contingency reserve. We will deliver what we have promised.

The total cost of this starting school building upgrade bond is about \$550 million. The median homeowner in Portland will pay about \$25 a month for six years in order to better support all of our 47,000 students in more than 100 Portland neighborhoods.

Even in these tough times – particularly in these tough times – education is worth the investment. Portland residents understand the value of education in helping our community’s young people be competitive in the job market. This school modernization work will also provide a strong shot in the arm for our local economy. It means jobs for hard-hit local construction workers, a multiplier effect on the local economy, and will strengthen property values and the appeal of our city neighborhoods.

I am very excited to be bringing this proposal forward, and pleased to begin this important discussion with the community.

We look forward to sharing more information on this important effort with our students, employees, families and the general public, and will take comments and questions by e-mail, phone and in person.

High quality schools are essential to maintaining Portland’s strong neighborhoods, offering students access to the technology and learning tools that give them a better opportunity to succeed in college and the workplace. We cannot wait any longer – the time is now to invest in our school buildings, in our students and in our future.