

SUPERINTENDENT'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON ENROLLMENT AND
TRANSFER (SACET)

Report to the Superintendent on High School Redesign

May 7, 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Superintendent's Advisory Committee on Enrollment and Transfer (SACET) was asked to look at the proposed high school redesign models. Here are our key findings and recommendations.

- The process is too fast and not comprehensive enough. We wish to avoid making the mistakes that were made in the K-8 transition.
- The district needs to examine all three legs of the stool – effective people, effective teaching and supports, and effective structures – simultaneously. Since each element affects the other elements, focusing on effective structures in isolation from the other elements is unwise.
- The district should implement a plan that has neighborhood schools as its foundation.
- The enrollment and transfer policy has enabled families to flee from struggling schools in poorer neighborhoods, thereby reducing enrollment and funding and further eroding the ability of some schools to retain all the families in their catchment areas. We acknowledge that there was good policy intent behind a “choice-driven” transfer policy. However, the negative unintended consequences of this policy must be addressed through a design that stabilizes and balances enrollment.
- There has been no real assessment of the financial cost of these models and whether or not these models are feasible or even possible. In addition, the district has not been clear about school closures. Taken together, these factors have contributed to public wariness of the design process.
- The district has not made a case for why complete redesign is necessary as opposed to identifying and improving the elements that are not working and expanding on the elements that are working.

The committee submits this report with the following consensus:

- 12 members fully support this report.
- One member supports the report but still has some questions.
- One member cannot support the report. The member believes the report focuses too much on information the committee does not have and not enough on the data that we have been given. Specifically, this member believes the committee has not substantially analyzed the clearly stated E&T policies of the models and the number of campuses that will remain with each model, and further believes the committee has failed to compare the models to existing high school models in the district and their successes and failures.

INTRODUCTION

The Portland Public Schools Superintendent's Advisory Committee on Enrollment and Transfer (SACET) was formed in 2008 to advise the Superintendent on enrollment and transfer issues as she seeks to improve equity, program access and educational achievement for all students. At the Superintendent's request, SACET began studying the District's High School Redesign models in March 2009. This report describes SACET's findings, concerns and recommendations. It begins with our view of the history and context, as well as some threshold questions and concerns, and then provides our insights on enrollment and transfer considerations. While we ventured beyond a look strictly at E&T impacts, we hope this work will prove helpful. SACET genuinely appreciates the opportunity to engage the redesign process from an enrollment and transfer perspective, and to provide our comments and observations to the Superintendent.

We approached our study and deliberations with our values and guiding principles in mind, including our obligation to represent all the communities and diverse interest in PPS, and our belief that Portland's vitality is rooted in strong neighborhoods, with public schools at the heart of local communities. As individuals and as a committee, we are driven by a shared desire to help improve the Portland Public Schools, by striving for excellent schools in each neighborhood that benefit all the children in our community.

History and Background

The committee began its work by reviewing the need for change at the high school level, the desired outcomes articulated by PPS, as well as the eight essential elements of a new system. The committee agreed with the ideals and aspirations set forth at the outset of the redesign process. The committee also concurs that to reach the desired outcome requires work across three spectrums: people, teaching and supports and structures. The current district process is only focused on creating effective structures.

The committee spent considerable time discussing the well-known history of change initiatives undertaken by the district that – together with other social and economic trends in Portland - have through time impacted the district in the areas of school performance, student achievement, graduation rates, transfer trends, enrollment, diversity and equity. In particular, the current and historic policy emphasis on choice – combined with mandated transfers under federal law - has led to inequities between schools in the system. The fairly liberal transfer policy has enabled families to flee from struggling schools in poorer neighborhoods, reducing enrollment and funding, and further eroding the ability of some schools to retain all the families in their catchment area. SACET recognizes that there was good policy intent behind a “choice”-driven transfer policy, and finds the negative unintended consequences of greater inequity and decreased diversity worth noting at this juncture.

We also feel strongly the painful lessons learned from the recent K-8 transition must be considered as decisions are made about the high school system. Some (many?)

Portland citizens lack confidence and trust that the full impact of changes will be analyzed and understood before such changes are made. This concern and distrust on the part of families was generated by the district's failure to take seriously the issues raised during community input on K-8, and its failure to conduct adequate due diligence before implementing such a major change. Both to regain public trust, and to guard against creating additional unintended and unanticipated consequences in school operations, we urge a fulsome and transparent due diligence process for high school redesign. A high level of confidence in decisions made with regard to redesign will benefit the district immeasurably, including supporting enrollment in PPS at the highest possible levels.

Some Fundamentals

As of this writing, the District is engaged in presenting the three "big ideas" to the public in an effort to gauge how the community lands on various trade-offs.

- The committee believes this exercise is valuable and necessary, but we do not believe that it suffices as rigorous analysis in pursuit of the defined goals around creating "effective structures."
- We hope that the Superintendent considers more than the public input garnered from this process in deciding on a preferred model.

SACET questions whether structural redesign alone is the appropriate approach to achieving the stated district goals.

- Without parallel analysis of redesigning or strengthening teaching and learning ("effective people, and effective teaching and supports"), the other two necessary components, how will we achieve the desired outcomes?
- We firmly believe that the quality of teaching, the culture in the schools, and leadership on the ground are at least as important – if not more so – than the organizational structures.

Furthermore, many on our committee would – given the opportunity – change the focus to "high school improvement," over "high school redesign," given that there are many aspects of the current system that work well. For example, we look at schools like Lincoln and Grant and wonder why they would need to be "redesigned." Whereas we look at schools like Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Madison and wonder if these schools might be improved by replicating some of the best practices at Lincoln and Grant. This leads us to pose this question: do we know what these best practices are and, if so, can they be replicated at these other schools?

The Public's Main Concerns (aka "The Elephants in the Room")

As of this writing, some public dialogue on the "big ideas" has come forward through a series of PPS-sponsored public forums on high school redesign. The public feedback echoes pieces identified by SACET:

- *Where will they get the money?*

- Which high schools do they plan to close? (And why can't they be up front about that?)
- Why would we risk changing current high schools that are working?

These “elephants in the room” will likely continue in the public dialogue about the current redesign effort. The committee would underscore that the Superintendent and the Board need to prove to themselves and the public that sufficient funding exists to fully implement the various models, with adequate contingencies for unforeseen costs.

Enrollment and Transfer Considerations

A redesigned system will require modifications to the existing enrollment and transfer policies and procedures. The timeline for high school redesign needs to include sufficient time for policy change. SACET looks forward to engaging more deeply in policy questions around E&T when additional details emerge about a high school model. Our goal is to help design an enrollment and transfer policy that achieves and maintains equity and balance. We desire a system that helps students transfer for positive reasons to a school that suits their needs, and discourages or eliminates transfer that amount to “flight” from less desirable neighborhood schools.

Overarching Concerns

The committee was able to articulate a number of overarching concerns that we hope and trust the Superintendent and Board are examining.

- From the materials we have reviewed thus far, it is difficult to tell exactly how or why the district believes that any of the models will achieve the four key objectives, particularly closing the achievement gap and reducing the drop-out rate.
- We believe that particularly rigorous study of where our current system is failing and succeeding, and why, together with careful due diligence around currently successful system elements, would help guide the best design.
- As noted earlier, we would have much greater confidence if the teaching and learning pieces were being similarly redesigned.
- SACET would like to see a greater emphasis on issues of race, class, disability and language status as they impact the learning environment and school culture. Data provided by the district underscores that our HS's are not serving these students well, even in the more affluent schools. It is not clear to us that redesign work is explicitly or adequately examining these dynamics. The committee calls for an explicitly articulated approach to creating programs in each of the high schools that address race, class, disability and ethnicity in an effort to sustain socioeconomically diverse populations. SACET recognizes that a failure to sustain diversity – especially in schools with disproportionately high concentrations of low-income minorities, ethnic minorities, students with IEP's and English Language Learners – will cause some students and families to flee these schools.

The committee's overarching concerns drive us to want to see more detailed implementation plans and tradeoffs.

- Logistics of a transition period, physical plant constraints and opportunities, staffing ramifications, and myriad other aspects will all require an immense planning effort and substantial funds.
- At the very least, the costs of redesign need to be understood so the economic tradeoffs of each model can be considered.
- More fundamentally, we do not think it would be prudent for a new model to be selected without first conducting a more rigorous analysis of how it would be operationalized.

These overarching questions lead our committee to believe that the established timeline for selecting a model and moving forward is too aggressive to allow the level of analysis and due diligence we firmly believe is required for success.

Notwithstanding these fundamental concerns and questions, we understand that the process is in motion and redesign will in fact move forward. We wish to be a helpful partner to the Superintendent as redesign is planned and implemented, and we stand ready to assist a focus on alignment across all three areas in tandem.

SACET’S ANALYSIS OF THE BIG IDEAS

Enrollment & Transfer Issues

Based on the concept models (“big ideas”), and high-level overview materials, SACET offers the following for the Superintendent’s consideration:

1. In a new system, SACET looks forward to helping design an enrollment and transfer policy that achieves and maintains equity and balance, rather than continuing to exacerbate today’s inequities.
2. Potential benefits of redesign include increased achievement and reduced concentrations of poverty. These improvements could result in high schools no longer being subject to NCLB sanctions and, therefore, increase enrollment stability and predictability for all high schools.
3. Redesign is a significant opportunity to better support students with disabilities who have traditionally been segregated by their disability and mostly unable to attend their neighborhood school. PPS should use this opportunity to improve all the physical structures so that they are truly accessible for children, parents, and teachers, and remove the burden currently shared by schools and families of traveling to specialized facilities.
4. Recognizing that population projections point to future and ongoing fluctuations in the number of school-age children in the district, we strongly recommend some modeling of the elasticity of enrollment and public financing through time. How readily can programs expand or contract within the various models? None of us would want to adopt a new system that in ten years or less became unmanageable.
5. School catchment area boundaries will need to be redrawn as the overall number of HS campuses decreases. New boundaries will inevitably require additional community dialogue, and will force our community to ask itself how we want to think about our “neighborhoods.” History, perceptions, and stereotypes (both positive and negative) will enter into this dialogue, and the district should make efforts to capture the positive and put the negative in the past as transition plans are made. SACET will want to engage in this work at the appropriate time.
6. SACET recommends careful planning of changes in feeder patterns from eighth grade, and suggests that to the greatest extent possible eighth grade classes not be split because we value cohorts of eighth graders being able to transition to HS together.
7. We hope that the plans for managing the K-12 articulated programs such as immersion – which we find to be helpful to keeping enrollment levels high currently – are thoughtfully drawn up and implemented.
8. The manner in which sibling preferences are handled inside the transfer system should be revisited. While the committee will no doubt look at this question outside of the HS Redesign work, to the extent new, special focus or magnet programs are offered that may be particularly popular, members of the committee worry about equity of access to special programs when some families get double, triple (or more) benefits at the expense of students who may actually have a greater need for scarce program slots.

Managing Risk for Students

The committee had some focus on students who may not thrive – for one reason or another – in large, comprehensive campuses. While it's clear that the district intends to address the needs of such students in its new design, the committee wishes to draw specific attention at this early stage to the needs of these students.

1. At a minimum, the chosen model needs to consider how struggling students can “opt out” mid-year and switch programs or schools but remain in our system rather than dropping out. The system – especially in the transition years – will be complicated, so anticipating ways in which students can shift gears mid-year is advised.
2. A new system to manage truancy/attendance problems will undoubtedly be required, especially for kids at risk of dropping out. We would hate to see greater numbers slip through the cracks because some level of community and engagement has been lost with larger campuses, since we know that attendance is linked to drop-out rates.
3. The two- to five-year transition period of the redesign will impact the affected cohorts of students and families in ways we may not be able to predict. We urge some assessment specifically for the transition phase, and planning to mitigate risks.

Other General Considerations

In the course of our discussions and analysis, SACET developed the following second-tier questions and observations for the Superintendent's consideration.

1. Our community does not have a consistent way of defining the key terms “diversity” and “equity,” and we think that clearly articulating these points as values is imperative. We also want to underscore our expectation that both terms encompass the community of students and families with disabilities.
2. Management of sports, clubs, and the myriad extra-curricular activities that for many families define the school culture and environment needs specific attention and planning up front.
3. More detailed plans about impacts on the teaching and learning environment for kids across the spectrum – including those with learning disabilities and those identified as TAG – need to be developed and articulated.
4. Educational options programs should ideally be kept within or adjacent to larger campuses so there are opportunities to “mainstream” students who utilize Ed Options on a timeline that meets the need of the student.
5. The need for teachers to move between buildings during the school day for any reason should be minimized. We strongly discourage teacher sharing between schools.
6. We believe that most Portlanders still value career and technical education for many reasons and think that the models need to make room for retaining those opportunities in the future.
7. Since many of our HS'ers travel to school via Tri Met, we assume that some advance planning for schedules and routes with Tri Met will take place prior to

- implementation. Consideration of Tri Met support for evening hours to support parent involvement and extracurricular student activities as well as community use of our buildings should also be part of that discussion
8. Outcome measurements and a picture of what success for individual schools looks like need to be articulated in advance and understood by the public. We feel this is especially important as incoming eighth graders do not all come equally prepared to HS. Ideally a district evaluation system would take in to account the variability of students more appropriately than do existing state and federal evaluation systems, so that all of us can monitor how well schools are moving students through high school, and not just monitoring the whole system against a single bar or standard.
 9. We hope the models address race and class differences that can drive people apart.
 10. We would like to see the models address why students drop out and how each one increases engagement.
 11. For magnet schools, we do not support a model of skill centers (½ day at neighborhood and ½ day at the magnet).

Conclusion

The committee hopes that this report is useful to the Superintendent and other District staff as they move forward with redesign considerations. We appreciate the ability to provide this input, and look forward to continuing to engage on these issues, as we believe that we can offer more detailed observations and assistance on implementing equitable policies around student access to programs when a preferred model is identified and we can view that model at ground level.

ANALYSIS OF THE PROPOSED MODELS

MODEL A: LARGE CAMPUSES WITH THEMES [BIG IDEA 1: SPECIAL FOCUS CAMPUSES]

Advantages:

- Depth and breadth of educational programs
- Breadth of special interest opportunities, including clubs, sports and activities
- Potential for long-term cost savings with consolidation of facilities and operation of larger schools
- Greater opportunities for professional development and support for teachers in larger schools

Cautionary notes and things to potentially improve about the model:

- Conduct a rigorous analysis when designing themes to guard against the possibility that they become exclusive
- Engage the community in development of themes
- Be deliberate about engaging parents as the larger campuses could make it harder for parents to become and stay involved
- Be deliberate about creating a community of students on campus in a larger environment than Portland is accustomed to
- Do not make themes exclusive campuses or restrictive. Students should be able to take courses in any area.
- Professional development will be required to make the themes work.
- Take care to not let the 9th and 10th grade academies look like middle schools.
- Take care not to lock students into particular tracks.
- District might need to build model schools in poor neighborhoods to ensure balance.

Concerns:

- Selecting a theme in 9th grade is hard for most students and seems risky. If they select a campus based on themes in 9th grade, but change their mind by 11th grade, they might need to transfer to a different campus at that point. This is disruptive.
- The inevitably smaller number of schools will mean some students have longer commutes
- Competition to be selected for sports teams and club activities will be greater with more students which could result in more kids not having an extra-curricular activity
- Having students track in 9-10 grade academies, and then 11-12 grade themed campuses detracts from the goal of diversity by limiting interaction amount the larger student body. It also reduces the ability of students to individualize their class selections, thus reducing student engagement.
- 11-12 grade themed pathways would require IB be limited to one track. Many students do not complete the full IB diploma, but still benefit from taking one or two IB classes. This would no longer be possible in this model.

MODEL B: STRONG SCHOOLS CLOSE TO HOME
[BIG IDEA 2: NEIGHBORHOOD HIGH SCHOOLS AND FLAGSHIP MAGNETS]

Advantages:

- Strong community and neighborhood focus with opportunities to form important connections
- Closer to neighborhood school which seems more fair to neighborhoods
- Larger schools than what we have today, resulting in long-term operating cost efficiencies
- Professional development opportunities for staff
- Could more equitably provide access to magnet programs than today
- A liberal arts orientation that let's kids explore more subjects throughout high school is appealing both academically and socially
- Doesn't require kids to make career choices too early
- Consistency across system can provide benefits
- The most like our current system, suggesting a less painful change management process. Community buy-in may be easier.
- Transfer policy could be more readily structured and we could better ensure that transfers occur for valid reasons, minimizing the "fleeing" factor
- Our HS's should become more diverse than they are today assuming transfers minimized and "skimming" ceases
- Allows students to be with their friends (something they desire) by not stratifying them into artificial smaller units/theme campuses. Maximizes the potential for students to interact with a wide range of fellow students.
- Some committee members felt this model best matched their desire for balanced enrollment and resources in each neighborhood.

Cautionary notes and things to potentially improve about the model:

- Don't limit neighborhood support to college preparatory subjects; nurture career and technical interests as well
- Take care with selection of magnets; get community engagement
- We will want to look at E&T policy to integrate schools in terms of SES; use magnet programs to draw diversity
- Will magnets offer core classes and electives? Need more definition of intent

Concerns:

- Since Portland's neighborhoods are not equally diverse (racially, ethnically, nor socio-economically), we're not sure how equity will be understood or experienced
- We question if it is possible for the stated goal school size of 1100 students to support a full program including music, art, PE, library services, counseling services, advanced classes and remedial supports given Portland's fiscal realities. We believe for this model to work, average school size would need to be larger.

MODEL C: REGIONAL FLEX

Advantages:

- For highly-motivated students with high-functioning and engaged parents, this model provides great choice and the opportunity for tailored programs

Cautionary notes and things to potentially improve about the model:

- Creating boundaries for the large regions will be challenging and potentially politically charged.

Concerns:

- Equity will suffer as navigating the system becomes more challenging
- Transportation logistics problems and other barriers for both students and teachers, especially those with mobility challenges
- Less community connections, and reduced involvement and mentoring possible
- Scheduling, hiring, forecasting matters will be highly complex
- It's not clear PPS has the real estate at the ready to accommodate three (potentially) giant campuses
- More isolating for teachers and students
- Young ninth graders moving between schools is risky