

Inaugural Address

Thank you, Board member Trevorrow, chair Rodriguez, each of the board members who elected me chair, and the voters who gave me the great honor to represent them. I'm so humbled to accept your nomination and election to become chair of the Portland School Board.

First, I want to thank Board member Rodriguez for leading the Board for the last two years. He has led us and our city with heart and moral clarity, inspired by his lived experience. He has been the Board's moral compass, leading with grace, compassion, and a true-north that never wavered from providing a just education for Portland children.

Thankfully, he's not going anywhere, and I'm counting on him to continue to be a co-conspirator as I take on this new role. Thank you, Roberto, for being the chair I now aspire to become.

I want to tell you a little about why I'm here today, and how I see the year ahead of us.

I am here today for two reasons: My family and the Reiche Community School.

Similar to so many Portland Public School families today, my family was forced to leave their countries many years ago in order to simply survive. They were what we would call asylees today. Families uprooted by terror, oppression, and ethnic cleansing. Uprooted with nothing but a need to survive.

My family fled antisemitism. My mother's family had to flee Russia during the pogroms at the turn of the 20th century. The pogroms were

anti-Jewish riots in which thousands were massacred by mobs as the police looked the other way. My father's family fled Austria during the Holocaust.

As you might imagine, my parents grew up with little, but public education opened many doors for them. (They were white, which made every difference. I'll have more to say about that in a moment.)

My parents imbued in me from a very young age the importance of education.

School always came first.

Then, as a young mom, I dropped off my five year old at the elementary school at the end of my block. And that's the second part of why I am here today: the Reiche Community School.

Ms. Otto, wearing vibrant African colors and her face full of wisdom, would greet us at the door every morning; Mr. Aweis taught my daughter Arabic in 1st and 2nd grades; I met kids in my daughters' classes who spoke two, three, and even six languages; I learned about social emotional learning and Reiche's teacher-led model from Chris Keegan, Kevin Brewster, and Lori Bobinski and later from Ted Hummel and Renee Serio, the lead teachers at Reiche.

Our multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and economically diverse school gave me hope for the future and for our city. And that motivated me to use the professional skills and experience I had developed over my 20-year career in public policy to fight for more resources for our schools.

It started with the school buildings. Reiche does not have walls between the classrooms, and it has very little natural light. It is hard for many kids to concentrate in the noisy building and impossible for some. When I pieced together the history and realized that the city had put off renovating not only Reiche but three other rundown elementary schools for more than two decades, I spent every moment I wasn't working or with my kids building support to renovate the schools. Thanks to the community, we came together and passed a \$64 million bond to renovate Reiche, Presumpscot, Longfellow, and Lyseth Schools. And while that day we passed the bond was so inspiring, it didn't come close to the wave of emotion I felt the day we broke ground on the renovation of Lyseth School! Now, Lyseth is more than 75% complete, and we're on track to break ground on the three other schools this spring. You can bet that I will shed many tears the day that we break ground on Reiche.

Now, years later, I'm more committed to our schools than ever. And I believe that not only do we need more resources for our schools, but we need to target those resources toward Black students, indigenous students, and students of color to begin to pay back our education debt.

Education debt is the cumulative impact of fewer resources and harm directed at students of color over generations. It is as Gloria Ladson-Billings, the prominent Black education professor and researcher, calls the "historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society."

In Portland, we have persistent gaps between white and non-white students on tests of academic proficiency. Our discipline data shows our non-white students are disciplined more frequently and harshly than their white counterparts. Our Black students and students of color do not see their own history reflected in our curriculum. This school year, 48% of our students identify as Black, indigenous, or students of color, yet the vast majority of our teachers are white.

The equity goal in the Portland Promise—our strategic plan—commits us to rooting out ongoing and systemic inequities in the Portland Public Schools. And Superintendent Botana has shown an unwavering commitment to equity. But, indicative of the scale of the challenge we face, we've made relatively little progress.

We have a great deal of work ahead of us to pay back our education debt and become an antiracist school district. But I am so inspired by our students, educators, and community to be a part of it.

And that's why I'm here today, thanks to my family and Reiche Community School.

Looking to the year ahead, we face truly unprecedented challenges:

We must keep our students and staff safe and our students learning in a pandemic that is worsening by the day in our community and all around us. Remote learning has been particularly difficult for our least advantaged students, including our students with disabilities, students who are English language learners, and those who are homeless.

At the same time, our students, families, and community are facing greater economic hardship than ever due to the pandemic, particularly our Black families and families of color.

And we still have a U.S. president for 43 more days and a U.S. Senate--controlled by Mitch McConnell--who appear unwilling to provide COVID relief to schools or to our city and state.

Before the pandemic, the work we were doing was very hard. Now the pandemic has laid bare and exacerbated so many of the inequities in our schools and community. And our work has become so much harder. But we are up to the challenge.

This year, in addition to operating our schools in the pandemic, I see three key priorities. These priorities will take more resources than we currently have. And they will also take redirecting resources to Black students, indigenous students, and students of color to begin to pay back our education debt. I want to acknowledge that the Board has wavered on this redirection of resources in the past.

First, under the leadership of Board member Bondo, we're creating an equity policy. This policy is long overdue and will guide our vital equity work going forward. But, once we create and pass the policy, we cannot let it sit on a shelf to gather dust as so many government policies do. We will need to put serious resources behind it. That includes committing to locally fund core equity investments like our Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion staff position. Grants come and go, but our commitment to equity cannot. It should be at the heart of our budget and sustained and deepened over time.

Second, we need universal pre-K that is accessible to families, meaning we provide care before and after school and transportation. There are few public policies that are silver bullets, but high quality early childhood education is one of them. We have made progress here. We have added classes and infrastructure. But to achieve universal pre-K, we must redouble our efforts.

Third, we need to fully fund the Lau Plan, our plan to provide an equitable education to our many English Language Learners. Our Lau Plan sees language is an asset to be cultivated, not a barrier to education. We have a strong plan, but we have to devote the resources to see it through.

All of this work will take understanding our school district as it is now—as we work to create the district as it should be.

Despite all of the challenges at the end of a year like none other, I am full of optimism, because we are a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and economically diverse community that truly values public education. I am grateful to live in this community, to send my children to our schools, to represent my community on the school board, and now to serve as chair of this Board.

Thank you for this great honor. I can't wait to see all we will accomplish together.