

State of the Schools 2020

Roberto Rodriguez, Portland Board of Public Education Chair

November 16, 2020

INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin tonight with what has now become a custom at Portland Board of Public Education meetings: recognizing and thanking the original and current inhabitants of the land on which our city and schools stand. The Maliseet, Micmac, Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribes are known collectively as the Wabanaki, or People of the Dawnland. I am grateful and honored for the opportunity to deliver this State of the Schools Address today from Wabanaki land.

Good evening, Mayor Snyder, City Councilors, and fellow Portlanders. As Chair of the Portland Board of Public Education, I am pleased to present to you the annual State of the Schools report.

Before I begin, I'd also like to recognize fellow Board members and newly elected Board members attending this meeting tonight, along with our Superintendent, educators and other dedicated members of the Portland Public Schools' team.

Welcome also to other members of our community. I'm glad everyone is able to be with us today because this annual accounting of our schools is not only required by our City Charter but is very important. We're all proud that Portland has become one of our country's most desirable places to live. But for our city to be truly

vibrant, we must continue to have good schools to attract the young families that are the lifeblood of our City's future.

I am grateful for this chance to talk to you today about the accomplishments of Portland's public schools over the past year and also about the challenges we face in the year ahead. I hope what you learn tonight will foster your advocacy and support for all we are trying to accomplish as a school district.

I've been School Board chair for nearly two years now, so this is the second time I've had the opportunity to present this address. If you had told me last November that in 2020, "mask" and "social distancing" and "hybrid learning" would become words that we use every day and that I would be speaking to you via Zoom – I wouldn't have believed you!

But that was before COVID-19 upended education as we had always known it. I will be reporting to you tonight on the unprecedented challenges we have experienced since we had to shut our doors in March due to the virus and reimagine overnight how to best educate all our students remotely. You'll learn how we have managed since then to keep students and staff safe while keeping our students learning. You'll hear about our successes and about our challenges – and also about the uncertainties that lie ahead.

However, the coronavirus is not the only crisis the Portland Public Schools is fighting. Our district continues to confront the issue of systemic racism.

We know that Racism is a problem throughout the world, and the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis this past spring, the many protests that followed and the long list of other Black Americans killed at the hands of police underscore that systemic racism is epidemic in this country.

But police violence is only a symptom of the larger problem. We are seeing firsthand the impact of injustice and inequality in all aspects of life, nationwide – and in Maine. For example, statistics this summer showed Maine had the nation’s largest racial disparity in coronavirus cases, with members of our Black community contracting COVID-19 at a rate more than 20 times that of white residents. While Black Mainers are about 5% of the population, they are over a third of the homeless in the State.

As a school district in Maine’s largest city, we are not exempt from bias and injustice. We have persistent gaps between white and non-white students on many measures of success. Also, our discipline data shows our non-white students are disciplined more frequently and harshly than their white counterparts. The Portland Public Schools has a great deal of work to do to redress these injustices.

The Equity goal in our Portland Promise – our strategic plan – commits us to rooting out ongoing and systemic inequities in the Portland Public Schools. Before COVID, with the support of the Council and our community, we made substantial investments in the past few years to help line up the resources and structures we need to address these inequities. Our FY21 school budget is themed

“Addressing the Opportunity Gap” and our initial proposal contained significant Equity investments to continue this work.

We had to scale back those plans in our final budget, due to the harsh economic realities facing the City as the result of COVID. But we have not – and must not – let that pandemic derail us from working towards our Equity goal. I’ll be talking about the investments we were able to fund in this budget, other steps we’re taking to foster Equity, and our goals for the future. At the Portland Public Schools, we are serious about eliminating injustice in our schools and, with the help of the Council and our community, believe we can achieve that goal.

CONFRONTING THE COVID PANDEMIC

First, I’ll give a brief overview of the impact of COVID-19 on the Portland Public Schools over the past nine months and our response to that pandemic. Our last day of traditional in-person school turned out to be Friday, March 13. We didn’t know it then, but our buildings had to stay shuttered for the rest of the 2019-2020 school year. The crisis required us to launch a massive experiment in remote learning overnight.

As Maine’s largest and most diverse school district, remote learning posed unique challenges for us. We have 6,500 students this year. About one-third of the district’s students come from homes where languages other than English are spoken—a total of more than 60 languages. About 52 percent of the district’s students are white. Students who identify themselves as Black, Latinx, Asian,

Indigenous or Pacific Islander or as having two or more races comprise the other 48 percent. Half of PPS students qualify for free or reduced school lunch.

We knew virtual learning would be particularly difficult for our least advantaged students – including our students with disabilities, students who are English language learners and those who are homeless. However, everyone at PPS committed to providing students with the best learning experience possible under the unprecedented circumstances.

We had to scramble to try to get tech devices into the hands of families. While our high school and middle school students already had their own district-issued devices, that wasn't true for our more than 3,200 students in pre-K through grade 5. And some families at all learning levels lacked home internet access – typically because they couldn't afford it. We made it our goal to ensure that every family had access to at least one tech device – although that sometimes meant several siblings had to share one device. We did that by ripping apart our school based laptop carts and assigning those devices to students. Also, we helped them connect to the internet through hotspots or other means. We were fortunate to place an order for 1,000 hotspots immediately prior to closure and as a result, we were not impacted by the long delays in hotspot delivery that others faced across the country.

As you heard earlier, over half of our students from food-insecure families depend on their daily school breakfast and lunch to keep hunger at bay. The number of hungry families increased when many Portland residents lost their jobs during

the pandemic. Even though our buildings were closed, a herculean effort on the part of our Food Service team ensured families could drive or walk up to get a nutritious bagged breakfast and lunch each day at more than a dozen outdoor food sites we set up around the city. Thanks to a waiver from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, school meals have been free to all students since the pandemic began.

Meanwhile, we worked non-stop to improve the remote learning experience for our students, particularly for those who had fallen behind. Even though it felt like building the plane at the same time we were flying it, we learned as we went. For example, after April break we had schools adapt their schedules to provide four days of assignments and one day that included targeted support, office hours and time for students to catch up and revise school assignments. On June 1, we transitioned from whole class lessons to a remote “Sun School,” in which targeted support for students who were furthest behind and those who needed to recover credits could catch up in small groups with their teachers. Students meeting standards had the option of extension lessons and activities.

Then came summer. We continued to distribute free students meals throughout the summer, and we provided extended academic support for targeted students in July. One key highlight of the summer came August 5 and 6, when our high school graduation ceremonies were held. Yes, they were two months late and were outdoor drive-in ceremonies, but they were still inspirational.

We had fantastic weather at scenic Ocean Gateway – thank you to the City for use of that venue! – but it was our approximately 500 graduating who really shone. The Class of 2020 showed great resilience during this unprecedented time. They were deeply disappointed to miss out on many cherished senior-year rituals, but they rallied. They studied hard to make it to graduation, and pitched in to creatively plan the safe, alternative ceremonies we held. They also won acceptance at a wide variety of colleges and universities around the nation, many of them elite institutions, and collectively won millions of dollars in scholarships and grants. The Portland Public Schools is very proud of the Class of 2020 for showing great perseverance in the face of adversity. We’re sure they’ll go far.

Meanwhile, our administrators and staff were hard at work all summer, planning for this fall. We established a Re-Opening Planning Team to develop implementation plans for the 2020-2021 school year. Since we couldn’t foresee what the pandemic would look like in September, the team had to fully develop three possible scenarios: full remote learning; a hybrid combination of in-person and remote learning; and a return to full in-person capacity. School leaders, teachers, school nurses and operations and other staff assisted the team in its work. The group also researched ideas from education experts and kept current with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and the Maine Department of Education.

The team’s recommendations went to the Portland Board of Public Education in August. After a marathon public hearing and meeting that extended into a second

day, we on the Board voted unanimously Aug. 19 to approve a hybrid plan for our schools this fall. That plan gave a choice of in-person or remote learning to families. Most chose the in-person option, in which students in pre-k through grade 9 attend school in small cohorts two days per week and learn remotely on the other three days. Students in grades 10-12 attend their classes remotely each morning and attend in-person sessions at school Learning Centers individually or in small groups at least one afternoon per week. About 900 of our students chose to participate in a fully remote learning experience through our Remote Academy.

We on the Board recognized there were no perfect choices in this pandemic. Full remote learning proved to have learning drawbacks for many students and is challenging for working parents. Full in-person learning posed a greater risk for COVID exposure. We chose the hybrid solution as an attempt to thread the needle between the two. Our decision was based on the best assessment of all the scientific and educational data available – that told us that in-person instruction is superior to remote for most students.

We began the 2020-2021 school year on Sept. 14. Everyone was nervous on the first day our buildings reopened, but our schools report that students and staff quickly adjusted and have welcomed the in-person experience. It is made possible by schools enforcing state- and district-mandated health and safety protocols, such as mask wearing, handwashing, physical distancing and daily symptom checks. Our staff – principals, teachers, custodians, bus drivers and others – have been the true

heroes by working through all of these protocols to keep each other healthy and safe.

We also have a robust outdoor learning program that is so successful that it has drawn attention from national media, including The New York Times, NBC News and U.S. News & World Report. Brooke Teller, our Outdoor Learning Coordinator, is also our STEM Coordinator, so students are combining studying science, such as by observing natural phenomena, with opportunities to be out in the fresh air, when the weather permits.

We faced significant challenges in getting Our Remote Academy launched because we had far more students decide to join it than we anticipated. At almost 900 students in kindergarten through grade 8, it suddenly became our newest and largest school. We initially had problems with technology acquisition and distribution, optimal scheduling of classes and lapses in communication with families. We have worked to address all those issues and the Remote Academy program now is running smoothly.

We continue to work at the district level to enhance the learning experience for both our in-person and Remote Academy students. Our experience over the past months and research on the topic show us that in-person learning is superior to remote learning for most students so we intend to prioritize in-person learning as much as possible.

However, as I speak to you, COVID-19 cases are rising around the country and in Maine. We have begun to experience more positive cases over the past two weeks. We will continue to monitor our data and make decisions that prioritize keeping our staff and students safe.

I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of many community partners during this crisis. There are too many to name so I'll just highlight a few, but we are extremely grateful for each and every one.

The Foundation for Portland Public Schools, which raises philanthropic support to enhance educational opportunities for PPS students, created The Families in Crisis Fund to help the School District assist families with emergency needs, such as paying rent during the pandemic or helping them access internet services for their children's remote learning. The Foundation also worked to promote donations to the PPS Food Fund, a collaboration by the Foundation and Food Fuels Learning, to help ensure food security for PPS students during the crisis. The Foundation also coordinated donations from Spectrum Healthcare Partners, Martin's Point Health Care, and InterMed, all of which joined together to provide 2,000 thermometers and 500 child-sized, reusable masks.

Also, with our students not able to attend in-person school full time, many of our working families are desperately in need of child care. We now have a total of 13 community partners, with two more in the works, answering that need. They include the City's Recreation Department and together they provide full- or partial-

day child care and enrichment programs for about 675 students. They are a lifeline for our families and we are deeply grateful.

And I would be remiss if I did not mention that much of this would not have been possible without the State level leadership of Governor Janet Mills and her Commissioner of Education Pender Makin. At the urging of the Governor's Economic Recovery Task Force, they dedicated \$180 million dollars to support school reopening. Without this funding, those partnerships I described and also significant improvements that we made to our facilities to improve air quality and to provide the staffing needed to allow us to manage the many required health and safety protocols would not have been possible.

Unfortunately, as many of you know, these funds are set to expire on December 31st. At this moment, we are looking at a significant gap of up to \$4 million dollars that we will need to fill by identifying possible savings in other programs and services to continue these efforts or cut the very programs that have made our school reopening possible.

CONFRONTING SYSTEMIC RACISM

I will turn now to our Equity initiatives, which are essential to our struggle to combat systemic racism in the form of bias and injustice in our schools. I'll give some highlights of what the district has accomplished over the past year:

The Board voted on July 1 to end our practice of having police resource officers at Deering and Portland high schools. The more than \$152,000 saved will be used in other ways to enhance safety and equity at all of our district's 18 schools.

This decision was controversial and the Board took into consideration passionate testimony on both sides. The bottom line, however, was that while some students felt safer with police in schools, many others – particularly our Black students and other students of color – did not. They worried they could be targeted in what should be welcoming learning spaces.

In the end, the Board supported having police-free schools so we can invest in community-building strategies. I strongly believe that will not only improve the sense of safety of our students of color but also the quality of their educational experience.

The Board in October also took another very significant vote: approving extensive changes to our policy protecting students from harassment and discrimination. The changes include more explicit definitions of terms, the implementation of safe reporting procedures and affirmation of the district's goal to create a climate of respect, inclusion, and equity for all.

The district worked with a coalition of community-based advocates over the past year to revise the policy. It now reflects best practice in terms of the prevention and handling of incidents of harassment, discrimination, and sexual harassment. It also aligns with new Title IX rules.

The changes in the policy also include safe reporting procedures designed to ensure that students can report instances of harassment and discrimination without fear of negative consequences or retaliation. While this policy development was already underway, the district faced an example of the need to provide safe reporting when it was faced with a number of allegations of harassment, sexual harassment and discrimination on social media this past summer. That resulted in an investigation that is nearing conclusion. A public report is expected in December. The Board's Policy Committee continues to work on reviewing multiple policies from an Equity perspective, including eight policies that govern the role of law enforcement in our schools. We intend to continue with our efforts to model community-engaged policy development.

Working with our Parent Engagement Committee, we conducted an equity audit to understand areas of strength and concern and create action plans on alternatives to traditional discipline. This work has attained broad recognition and the Nellie Mae Foundation has selected the Portland Public Schools as one of three New England districts that they want to support in their efforts to include diverse voices in improving outcomes for BIPOC students.

The Board also voted this year to rename Riverton Elementary School as the Gerald E. Talbot Community School in honor of one of Portland's most respected community leaders, who has devoted his life to fighting for equal rights and social justice issues. Gerald Talbot is the first African American to be elected to Maine's

Legislature and to chair the Maine State Board of Education. He's also an educator, author, historian, military veteran, civil and human rights activist and founding president of the Portland branch of the NAACP. Renaming the school after Mr. Talbot underscores that he is a role model for both Portland students and adults.

Beyond that symbolism, we're deepening our efforts to hire diverse staff and support existing staff to have our workforce better reflect the diversity of our student body. We're focusing on our curriculum to ensure that what and how we teach is equitable and representative of all students. This work includes a focus on Wabanaki Studies and an Africana Studies curriculum in the process of being developed. And, we have created an Equity Leaders Cohort, where staff members from each school lead equity training for our staff.

In this year's FY21 school budget, we had hoped to make major progress toward our Equity goal this year by starting to phase in \$1.4 million of opportunity gap investments focused on our students who are English Language learners. Due to the unprecedented economic and educational disruptions caused by COVID, we shelved those plans. But our lean FY21 budget does have some important Equity investments, which include:

- Funding for two additional pre-kindergarten classes. Those are part of the district's five-year pre-K expansion plan to give students – particularly disadvantaged students – a head start on learning.

- Shifting to the local budget \$665,000 in Title funding positions that will allow us to continue support services in schools with a high number of disadvantaged students. Our federal title funding was reduced at the same time we faced escalating costs.
- Adding an autism spectrum disorder program for high school students and also increasing investments in our math and literacy curriculums.

To help address our Equity funding needs, the Foundation for Portland Public Schools stepped up this year with a new community campaign to raise at least \$100,000 to accelerate and expand our school district's equity work. The campaign is titled "Addressing the Opportunity Gap," and we are very grateful to the foundation for undertaking this vital initiative.

Last but not at all least, the Board also is renewing its commitment to Equity. The Board and our superintendent read a book titled "How to be an Antiracist" by Ibram Kendi over the summer. Other board members and I recently led the community in a virtual two-part Parent University discussion of the book. Together as a Board, we will be participating in a course called "Race in America" taught by two of our own Portland Public Schools teachers: Alberto Morales and Fiona Hopper. This is all part of an effort to grow in our understanding of race, racism, and white privilege and how to confront it. The Board's role is setting policy for the Portland Public Schools, and we believe that to make informed decisions

about policy, we need to deepen our knowledge of systemic racism and its impact on our schools and society.

PROGRESS TOWARDS OTHER PORTLAND PROMISE GOALS

While Equity is central to our Portland Promise goals, we continue to work towards realizing our other three goals. I'll give a few highlights of successes in those areas.

As one example of progress towards our Achievement goal, five of our high school seniors have been named Semifinalists in the 2021 National Merit Scholarship Program. That's the highest number of National Merit Semifinalists from the Portland Public Schools in more than five years. These academically talented students – Portland High's Liam Foley and Andrew Leonard; Deering High's Aidan Blum Levine and Matthew Keast; and Casco Bay High's Oscar McNally – now have the opportunity to compete for National Merit Scholarships worth more than \$30 million that will be offered next spring.

One of the strategies of our Whole Student goal is that each student has a connection to a caring adult. Whether our students are attending school in-person or remotely, our learning plan this year is intentionally designed so that each student has a Portland Promise point person. At the elementary level, the classroom teacher ensures that every student has a point person and coordinates communication and support for all students, using a team approach. In middle school and in high school, all students have a designated "advisor," who serves as

the student's primary social-emotional learning point person. The advisor stays attuned to their advisee's academic growth, attendance, social-emotional engagement and communicates regularly with families at least once every two weeks.

Our People goal commits us to attracting and retaining a diverse staff of the best and the brightest in the profession. Cindy Soule, a fourth-grade teacher at Talbot Community School, is a prime example of the outstanding educators at the Portland Public Schools. After becoming the 2020 Cumberland County Teacher of the Year in May, Cindy went on last month to win the title of Maine 2021 Teacher of the Year. We're very proud of Cindy!

We also continue to make progress on our \$64 million Buildings for our Future project of renovating four of our elementary schools to ensure students at those schools have up to date learning settings. The renovations to Lyseth Elementary School are on track to be completed next fall. We were planning to go out bid on the renovations for Longfellow, Reiche and Presumpscot schools, but we paused the projects to evaluate the impact of the recent passage by City voters of Portland's Green New Deal on the projects.

CONCLUSION:

As I conclude, I again want to express my deepest gratitude to all of our Portland Public Schools People for their truly herculean efforts to support our students and families during this unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. Everyone –

including food service employees, transportation staff, teachers and ed techs, nurses, school social workers and counselors, school administrators, our Central office team, other school and district support staff, and Board members – have worked tirelessly to meet the needs of families and students.

I also want to thank our families. The educational changes we've had to make due to COVID have placed a tremendous burden on them, but they've been incredibly flexible, cooperative, and supportive of both remote learning and our hybrid model.

We are very grateful to our families for being such involved partners in ensuring student success.

Looking ahead in the coming months, COVID-19 will continue to pose formidable challenges to our school and community. In the new year, we will have the challenge of developing our FY22 budget as our state and city face a harsh economic reality.

I pledge myself and, I am confident, my colleagues on the Board, to work closely with the Council to weather that reality. Portlanders have shown time and again that they value public education. Working as one City, , we will provide the city's students with the quality education needed to make progress to all four of our Portland Promise goals: Achievement, Whole Student, People and Equity.

Thank you and good night.