

State of the Schools 2019

Roberto Rodriguez, Portland Board of Public Education Chair

November 18, 2019

INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin tonight by recognizing and expressing gratitude to those whose land we reside on, the original and current inhabitants of the land in which our city and schools stand. The Maliseet, Micmac, Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribes, 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, standing on your land.

Good evening, Mayor Strimling, 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 my fellow Board members who are here with us today, along with our Superintendent, educators and other dedicated members of the Portland Public Schools' team.

This accounting of the state of education in Portland that we present to you each year is very important. It's important not only because it is required by the City Charter, but also because the success of our schools goes hand in hand with the success of our city.

Portland frequently tops national lists as one of the best places to live in the country. Good schools are key to continuing to make our city such an attractive, livable community, particularly for young families. I am grateful for this opportunity to talk to you today about Portland's public schools, and I hope this conversation will be an ongoing one.

In this address, I will be discussing the Portland Public Schools' many accomplishments over the past year. To give you a few quick highlights, our students and staff have won multiple accolades and honors; our graduation rate has climbed; and the vegan hot meals we've introduced in our elementary schools are winning rave reviews from parents and students and made national news.

We're gratified that Portland voters approved our fiscal year 2020 school budget in June by a margin of 2:1. That budget advances our Portland Promise work by expanding our pre-kindergarten program, building our capacity to deliver high-quality core instruction and implementing a behavioral health continuum.

I also will be talking to you about the challenges the district faces – most notably the persistent achievement gap between our economically advantaged students and economically disadvantaged students. I want to use this opportunity today to propose a more collaborative way of working to address such challenges. That's because they involve big picture issues that the school district can't solve all by itself.

This past summer, we saw a great example of how Portland stakeholders can successfully work together. Approximately 450 asylum seekers unexpectedly

arrived in our city, starting in June, and the sudden influx of these families could have overwhelmed a lesser city. However, the city and nonprofits immediately teamed up to feed and shelter these newcomers at the Portland Expo, while looking to find them more permanent homes. Drove of community volunteers stepped up too, giving generously of their time and money to assist the Expo families. We at the Portland Public Schools also did our part to assist the more than 100 school-age children among the families. Our Multilingual Center staff gave up their summer break time to do an intake process with those students, evaluating each student's academic, social-emotional and medical history and English proficiency. Our summer school staff also mobilized to welcome the new arrivals in our summer school programs, helping to orient them to our public schools and improve their English. We knew these youngsters would benefit from these programs, whether they stayed with us – as 48 of the students did – or go on to other cities and towns. Portland Adult Education, working together with the city and local nonprofits, also pitched in, offering English classes to adults at the Expo. The selflessness and passion of those involved in the effort to help these families was truly inspiring. But none of us could have done it alone. What stands out to me is how much we all – the City, the Portland Public Schools, community partners and community members – were able to accomplish by working seamlessly together. I urge all of us to think about how we can replicate this same kind of success by working collaboratively to address the challenges facing our schools.

THE EQUITY CHALLENGE

The challenges we face are many, but most relate to one key issue: Equity. With 6,750 students, we're Maine's largest school district. We're also the most diverse. Just over one-third of our students – 35 percent – come from homes where languages other than English are spoken—a total of 63 languages. About 53 percent of our students are white and 47 percent are students of color. Approximately half our students qualify for free or reduced school lunch. Through Portland Adult Education, or PAE, we typically serve approximately 4,000 adults each year, in academic and ELL classes, as well as enrichment and job skills classes. About 50 percent of our PAE students are immigrants learning English and gaining knowledge and job skills to integrate more fully into our community. Ensuring all our students have an equitable education is what drives us. You're probably heard us talk about Equity as part of the Portland Promise, our strategic plan, announced two years ago. The Portland Promise defines four clear, measurable goals – Achievement, Equity, Whole Student and People – to help prepare and empower our students for success in college and career. Of those four goals, Equity is the centerpiece. It pledges the Portland Public Schools to support each student's particular path to achieving high standards and rooting out systemic or ongoing inequities. But one inequity that the district can't root out all by itself is the persistent achievement gap between our economically advantaged students and economically disadvantaged students. Economically advantaged students do great. Our data shows them performing on par with students in surrounding school districts. However, that same data shows

big gaps in proficiency for our economically disadvantaged students, as well as our students of color and English language learner students.

We're not alone in having such gaps – they exist across Maine and around the nation. Recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress test – also known as NAEP or “the Nation’s Report Card” – showed Maine students overall doing well compared to other states. Our students scored at or slightly above national average scores for fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math.

But Maine’s scores also showed big gaps in achievement for minority and economically disadvantaged students.

Those gaps mirror comparable gaps in scores around the country, according to Flynn Ross, chair of teacher education and associate professor at the University of Southern Maine, who was featured in a Portland Press Herald story about the test scores.

Flynn noted that there are a wide variety of reasons for the achievement gap, including education, health and transportation issues and lack of access to housing. That’s why, instead of calling the proficiency gap between our minority and economically disadvantaged students and our other students an achievement gap, I suggest reframing this issue to call it an opportunity gap. Many of these students who are not achieving simply lack the same opportunities as other students. We at the Portland Public Schools are doing our part, but we can’t resolve opportunity gaps alone.

As a community, every time we praise the achievements of our students, we should also ask ourselves, if the right support structures were in place, who else might be able to also achieve such successes.

For example, three of our high school seniors were named Semifinalists in the 2020 National Merit Scholarship Program this fall. We’re very proud of these students, who were among just 73 students across Maine to achieve that honor. They now have the opportunity to become Finalists and compete for National Merit Scholarships worth more than \$31 million that will be offered next spring.

Yet at the same time, we all can wonder how many of our other students might also have become National Merit Semifinalists if they had such opportunities as Chegg tutoring sessions and a strong support network for their college vision.

We know from experience that support networks can work wonders for students.

For example, support from the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southern Maine helped two Reiche Community School fifth-graders, Shy Paca and Natalia Mbadu, play a role in a historic Maine event earlier this year. The Boys & Girls Clubs organization offers musical instruction to youngsters, most of whom can’t afford private lessons, because it helps build self-confidence, self-esteem and academic and social skills. Shy and Natalia, who come from immigrant families, began singing together at the Boys & Girls Clubs and ended up being invited to Gov. Janet Mills’ historic inauguration as Maine’s first woman governor. During the ceremony, Shy’s and Natalia’s performance of Alicia Keys’ “Girl on Fire” brought the audience at the Augusta Civic Center to its feet. The girls also got a big hug from the new governor. Thank you, Boys & Girls Clubs of Southern Maine and our other key community partners, such as the Foundation for Portland Public Schools, for all you do to help

fill in such opportunity gaps for our students. However, there is so much more to be done.

As a school district, we are focused on opportunity gaps. With your support, we have made substantial investments in the past few years to help line up the resources and structures we need to address them.

One of our main budget initiatives this year is the expansion of our pre-kindergarten program. We've added two new pre-K classrooms this year and will continue to add more classrooms each year over the next four years, part of an effort to eventually offer pre-K to all Portland 4-year-olds.

We're expanding pre-K because decades of research show that while all students benefit from pre-K, economically disadvantaged children and dual language learners show the greatest gains in learning.

For other students, our efforts include focusing on increasing participation rates in gifted and talented programs, Advanced Placement classes and dual enrollment for potentially at-risk students. With the aid of a \$150,000 Barr Foundation award we won in 2018, we participated in a one-year research project that showed advanced coursework is predictive of better postsecondary outcomes.

Also, in September, representatives from two of the nation's historically black colleges and universities – HBCUs for short – visited our high schools for the first time to talk to students and staff about what HBCUs have to offer. Statistics show that 50 percent of all black professionals are graduates of HBCUs.

Our Parent University is now in its third year. Parent U allows parents and caregivers to learn from experts and each other, through free classes and events that are fun, interactive, and informative. It focuses on topics important to families, and enhances Equity by bringing together families of all backgrounds united in wanting the best for their children.

Another initiative related to our Equity goal occurred this past December, when we created the PPS Food Fund. The fund, administered by the Foundation for Portland Public Schools, supports food security for Portland Public Schools students and their families. We've also expanded our school breakfast program and our summer meals program to help hungry students achieve their learning potential.

In short, we're trying to understand what barriers exist that make school success more difficult for our economically disadvantaged students, as well as our students of color and English language learner students (which, in Portland, tend to be the same students). Then, we're working to remove those barriers.

But many of the opportunity gaps our students face involve significant societal issues the school district can't solve alone. One example of that is homelessness stemming from the lack of affordable housing and stagnant wages.

That is why I'm asking everyone in our community today to broaden the conversation to help us to address these opportunity gaps. For example, when we talk about sheltering the homeless, our discussion as a community should focus not just on where facilities are located, but also on how our city's children are being impacted by family homelessness and what they need to have in order to be able to learn. Looking back over the past five years, the number of homeless students typically has increased each year. The Portland Public Schools had 136 homeless students as of Oct. 1, 2015 but that number grew to 251 homeless students as of Oct.

1 this year, an increase of about 85 percent. Only by looking at our challenges through such a broad, citywide lens will we be able to achieve real solutions.

OTHER CHALLENGES

Now let me give you a brief overview of the progress we're making to realize the three other goals in the Portland Promise – Achievement, Whole Student and People – and how we're trying to overcome challenges and achieve Equity in those areas as well.

A) ACHIEVEMENT/EQUITY CHALLENGE

Our Achievement goal says every student will have the knowledge and skills needed to succeed at the next level, and be empowered with a plan for what to do with that knowledge. Our five-year target is that 92 percent of our students will graduate from high school ready for college and career.

I'm pleased to say we're making strong progress toward that goal. The graduation rate increased 4 percentage points between the 2015-2016 academic year and the Class of 2019, from 82 percent to 86 percent.

The more than 500 members of the Class of 2019 were an impressive group of students. They collectively won more than \$3 million in scholarships and grants when they graduated this past June. They also were accepted at a wide variety of top colleges and universities throughout our nation and even abroad.

They're among the many Portland Public Schools students whose academic achievements stand out.

I'll cite just a few to give you an idea of the range of our students' accomplishments:

- This past January, the Deering Debate Team took top awards in several categories at the Maine State Championship Speech and Debate Tournament and won the team Sportsmanship Award.

- Two teams of King Middle School eighth-graders won the Maine State KidWind Challenge in March with their model wind turbines, besting 26 other teams.

- In May, Casco Bay High School became one of only seven schools across the country this year to receive recognition as a Gold School of Opportunity. That designation honors excellent public high schools that engage in research-based practices that build on students' strengths and create rich, challenging learning opportunities for all students.

Those are some of our Achievement successes. However, we also have challenges when it comes to our Achievement goal.

Our most recent standardized test scores show that we need to make better headway. While the math and English language arts scores of Portland students are in line with the state average, they have remained virtually flat over the past three years.

As I noted earlier, these scores reflect our Equity issue in practice.

To improve Achievement and also realize our Equity goal, one of our budget initiatives this year focuses on strengthening core instruction. In the past, we haven't focused on curriculum development from a districtwide perspective. Now, we're creating vertical content area teams that will give us a bird's eye view of our curriculum across all levels – elementary, middle and high school. That will allow us

to develop a shared and coherent vision for instruction at all levels, and bring a lens of Equity and high expectations for all students to our current practices.

Another way we're working to strengthen our core curriculum is by taking steps that include diversifying materials and content and ensuring what is being taught is relevant and engaging to all students. Research shows this is a core strategy to improve outcomes for all our students and help realize our Equity goal.

As you know, the state of Maine celebrated Indigenous Peoples Day instead of Columbus Day for the first time last month. As a district, we followed the Council's lead on this calendar change before the state acted. Some of our students are Wabanaki, but we're developing a Wabanaki curriculum to teach about Maine's Indigenous peoples because we believe that's necessary to give ALL our students a comprehensive understanding of the history of our state and our nation. This is an example of how we are working to make our curriculum relevant to all of our students.

B) WHOLE STUDENT/EQUITY CHALLENGE

The Portland Promise Whole Student goal commits us to teaching not only academics, but also to helping students develop socially and emotionally so they can attain the skills, habits and mindset for success in life.

That is why another key initiative in this year's budget is building a system of continuous support around behavioral health. This continuum recognizes that some students need higher levels of support, but also that healthy social-emotional development is important for all our students.

The foundation of our behavioral health continuum, which also supports our Achievement and Equity goals, is the development of a school culture and climate that reinforces positive behavioral interventions and supports. We've added social workers and behavioral health professionals, and also are building the capacity of all of our staff, because that's key to making this happen. We also have reorganized our most intensive programming. Formerly the Bayside Learning Community, it is now called the Breathe Day Treatment program and is located in two of our elementary schools and each of our middle schools for most students, and at Portland High School for some day treatment students.

C) PEOPLE/EQUITY CHALLENGE

Our fourth Portland Promise goal is our People goal. We would be unable to achieve our other three goals without a talented and diverse staff. The Portland Public Schools is one of Portland's largest employers. We have approximately 1,300 regular staff members.

We have many talented people on our staff, and they have the awards to prove it. Let me mention just a few:

- In October, Casco Bay High School math teacher Priya Natarajan won a Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching and received a \$10,000 award from the National Science Foundation.

- In May, Olivia Bean, a new science teacher at Portland High School, won a five-year Knowles Teaching Fellowship for early-career math and science teachers, worth approximately \$150,000.

● Deering High School social workers Melissa McStay and Bob Carroll recently received a Caring About Lives in Maine Suicide Prevention award for assisting the Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program in creating suicide prevention lessons that are now available to all Maine schools.

I'm also happy to report that the Board in September formally approved a new three-year contract with our teachers, represented by the Portland Education Association. Highlights include a 1-percent salary increase in the first year and a 2.5 percent increase in both the second and third year and multiple non-economic provisions that make for more collaborative, effective and efficient operation of the city's public schools. This collective bargaining agreement helps enhance our People goal of attracting the best and the brightest by keeping our teacher pay regionally competitive and ensuring our schools continue to operate smoothly and effectively. We firmly believe this agreement will lead to better educational outcomes for Portland students.

We also continue our efforts to increase the diversity of our staff to better reflect the diversity of our students and families.

In the summer of 2019, the Portland Public Schools successfully completed the third year of our educator diversity program, called TeachPortland. The program provides high school students, college students and adults in our community who are interested in the teaching profession the opportunity to gain classroom experience and relevant professional development. We had 44 participants in our classroom program this year across nine locations, and ultimately hired five participants into positions this fall.

This past January, we also added a new link to our effort to diversify our workforce with the launch of the Education Academy at The New Mainers Resource Center at Portland Adult Education. The Education Academy assists new Mainers trained as teachers in other countries to become licensed educators here. We had a total of 11 Education Academy graduates this spring and most are working in our schools – three as teachers, three as educational technicians and one is an AmericaCorps/Vista staff assistant at Riverton's after-school program. Another is a volunteer at King Middle School while awaiting work authorization, and others have jobs at schools in other communities. This year, we have 11 more students enrolled in Education Academy programs, whom we expect to be equally as successful.

BOARD/DISTRICT INITIATIVES

Let me also mention a couple Board initiatives over the past year:

● Last fall, the Board created an Enrollment and Facility Study Commission to identify and recommend possible cost-saving efficiencies in school usage to address projected declines in state aid. Although the Commission didn't recommend any immediate reconfigurations of our buildings, its work doesn't go away. The Commission's report provides an invaluable baseline of data and options to inform future decisions about our facilities.

● This past August, the Board directed the superintendent to pursue a solar energy power purchase agreement. We were inspired by the leadership of the SolaRISE student-led effort to build support for a solar energy program in the Portland Public

Schools. The district has joined a solar energy consortium with the City and hopes to save about \$50,000 per year using solar power.

CONCLUSION

This concludes a look back at our district over the past year. Now, let's look to the coming year. We are already beginning the planning stages of the fiscal year 2021 school budget.

As this Council knows, our FY 2020 budget process was a challenging one, with only a small increase in state education aid that didn't meet the district's revenue needs. We are grateful to the Council for working so closely with us to achieve a responsible budget that preserves our staffing and programming and also allows for key improvements, such as expanded pre-kindergarten and a well-resourced behavioral health continuum. On June 11, Portland voters validated our \$117.4 million school budget, which raised the school portion of the tax rate by 4.9 percent. Voters supported the budget by a margin of more than 2 to 1, generously demonstrating once again that this is a community that believes in the importance and value of public education.

Unfortunately, we will continue to face complex funding dynamics for the 2021 budget. The state's school-funding formula allots less state funding to communities like Portland that have high property valuation, expecting them to be able to contribute more to local education. That means that – without significant changes to the state funding formula – we must continue to ask our community's property owners to fund more of the cost of education in Portland.

This is a challenge, yet it is another case where we are asking everyone to see this as a challenge not just for the Portland Public Schools, but also for the entire Portland community. The message from our community is consistent and clear year after year: Portlanders want good schools and are willing to invest in them.

We must figure out how to not only support our current level of education but to improve it so we can meet our Portland Promise goals, while at the same time being cognizant of Portland taxpayers.

We plan to start early, as we did last year, to work and talk with everyone involved – including this Council and your Finance Committee and the community and also our state legislative delegation and the governor's office – on the best way to address this challenge.

It will take the entire community to find creative and lasting solutions to ensure that Portland is able to continue to offer all our students the quality education they need and deserve. It's a big challenge but – based on this summer's experience with the Expo families – I'm confident that if we approach it through a broad, citywide lens, we will be able to achieve real solutions.

Thank you and good night.