

State of the Schools 2017

Anna Trevorror, Portland Board of Public Education Chair

November 20, 2017

Good afternoon, Mayor Strimling, city councilors, educators, and members of the public. As chair of the Portland Board of Public Education, I am pleased to present to you the annual State of the Schools, as required by Portland's City Charter.

I'd like to recognize my colleagues from the board who are here with us today. I'd also like to acknowledge Superintendent Xavier Botana and other hardworking members of the Portland Public Schools' team, who also are in attendance.

I know I speak for that team and my board colleagues when I say that we do the work that we do because we believe in the importance of public education. In fact, the school board recently issued a proclamation of support for public education, joining other school districts nationwide in an "I Love Public Education" campaign.

That campaign raises awareness at a time when the projected federal budget contains cuts to programs and services that provide critical support to public schools and some of our neediest students.

Let me highlight a few of the reasons for ALL of us to love public education.

One reason is economic. Investing in public education is crucial to ensuring the future health of our economy. A robust investment in education is necessary to equip schools with the resources to position students to acquire the skills and knowledge needed for college and career success.

A free public education also is essential to our democratic system of government, something our Founding Fathers recognized. Thomas Jefferson said educating the public was the only sure way to guarantee the preservation of our liberty.

Public education remains a path for our students to achieve their dreams, no matter how humble their beginnings. Without a free public education, there would be an even greater divide between the educated and uneducated, the rich and poor, the strong and weak.

Public education helps students become better global citizens, ensuring our country's global competitiveness. This is especially true in Portland, Maine's largest and most diverse school district.

Diversity is one of our greatest assets because it allows students to be exposed to the history and culture of many regions of the world and learn multiple languages. Our students develop empathy for human differences and commonalities.

For public education to succeed, it must be of high quality. At the Portland Public

Schools, we offer a quality education. Recently, our district was named as one of the top 10 school districts in Maine by Niche.com. As you know, we recently launched The Portland Public Schools Promise, our pledge to the community to continue and intensify our efforts to ensure that all our graduates are prepared and empowered to succeed in college and career.

You'll find a handout on the Portland Promise in your packet. This communication effort was launched Oct. 5 at Unum, which generously supported it. The Portland Promise was developed under the leadership of our administrative team, along with the school board, district staff, students, parents and partners. All worked together to determine how to best fulfill our school district's unique potential.

This pledge hinges on four goals established in our updated Comprehensive Plan – Achievement, Whole Student, Equity, and People. We've set five-year targets to measure our progress toward each of these goals.

Here's a brief summary of these goals and our targets for them:

- **Achievement:** 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 college and career ready. Our current percentage is in the 80s.
- **Whole Student:** We do more than teach academics. We are responsible for exposing students to a well-rounded education that connects them to their diverse talents and helps them develop the skills, habits and mindset for success in life. Our five-year target is that 95 percent of our students will feel valued and connected to a caring adult at our school.
- **Equity:** Our data shows that our financially advantaged students compete favorably with students from other school districts. Beyond test scores, research suggests that, in fact, they're better off because they learn in the diverse environment that is the Portland Public Schools. However, our data also shows that our financially disadvantaged students do not have the same outcomes. As a district – as a community – we cannot allow factors such as zip codes, family income or education level, race or native language to define our outcomes. Our five-year target is a 50 percent reduction in academic achievement and opportunity gaps.
- **People:** Without the most talented and diverse staff working as one to achieve the other three goals, we won't be able to achieve them. We are committing to ensuring that our staff members have the skills and support that they need to realize expectations. Our five-year target is that 95 percent of staff members are satisfied and engaged in the work that they do.

We will publicly report on these ambitious targets and hold ourselves and our staff accountable for reaching them.

We are communicating our message through the banners you saw coming in here tonight, posters on buses and announcements on the district's website and in the community.

The campaign showcases a number of our successful graduates who are doing amazing things in our community. Their experiences make it clear that the Portland Public Schools is a great choice for families and deserving of community support. In fact, let's hear from our graduates how Portland's public schools have helped shape them into the leaders that they are in our community today:

VIDEO: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=OQRWMHDOB74

I've watched that video several times now but it never ceases to be inspirational. I invite everyone to go to <https://www.portlandschoolspromise.org/> to learn more about these graduates and about the Portland Promise.

Beyond goals and communications, The Portland Promise maps a plan for our future. However, even before its launch, we were already making strides towards achieving our four goals. I'd like to touch on some of the district's accomplishments over the past year in the areas of Achievement, Whole Student, Equity and People. First, just a few facts about our district.

We serve more than 6,700 students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12. Our enrollment is essentially stable – on par with last year's numbers. We're the most diverse school district in Maine.

More than half our students qualify for free or reduced school lunch. One-third of our students come from homes where languages other than English are spoken—a total of 61 languages districtwide. Nearly 44 percent of our students are students of color.

120 of our students are enrolled in pre-kindergarten, a steady increase since our program started in 2011. Research shows that students who experience quality pre-K perform better academically and go on to attend college at a greater rate.

Through Portland Adult Education, we served more than 4,000 adults last year, in academic and English Language Learner (ELL) classes, as well as enrichment and job skills classes. Adult Ed is a valuable resource for parents of our students and other community members trying to better their lives.

These numbers show that Portland Public Schools' programs are having a direct impact on the lives of approximately 1 in 6 Portlanders.

Our district is one of Portland's major employers. We have more than 1,200 regular staff members.

We are already taking steps to increase the diversity of our staff – part of our People goal.

Over the summer, the Portland Public Schools successfully launched TeachPortland, a program focused on creating a pipeline of diverse educators who more closely reflect the diversity of our students and their families. More than 40 people participated in the program, which we offered in conjunction with our partner, the University of Southern Maine.

The district has since hired three participants and another five participants are working for AmeriCorps in our buildings this year. TeachPortland will continue to evolve in the coming year, with additional events, job shadow and internship opportunities and university coursework offerings.

The Portland Public Schools is proud that it already attracts some of the best and brightest educators in Maine.

I'll mention just a few of our outstanding staff members who have been recognized over the past year for their accomplishments.

- Ann Hanna: In her former role as assistant principal of Ocean Avenue Elementary School, Ann was named Maine's Elementary School Assistant Principal of the Year for 2017. Ann is now using her outstanding leadership skills as principal of Riverton Elementary School.
- Brooke Teller: Brooke, the founding chemistry teacher at Casco Bay High School, is Cumberland County's 2017 Teacher of the Year, chosen for her exemplary service in education and dedication to students.
- Priya Natarajan: Priya, a Casco Bay High School math teacher, recently was named a state finalist in the 2017 Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching Program.
- Talya Edlund: Talya, Maine's 2016 Teacher of the Year, recently left her job in the Cape Elizabeth schools to join us as a teacher at Riverton Elementary School. Talya has said she joined our district for reasons that include our diversity and our staff's commitment to best practices.

I'll take this opportunity to thank all our staff for making the Portland Public Schools such a great school district. Our People goal will help us continue to attract the most talented and diverse staff, ensuring that our school district continues to be one of the best in the state.

When it comes to our Achievement goal, we're continuing with our work to prepare our students to receive Proficiency-Based Diplomas. The state has mandated that starting with the Class of 2021 – who currently are this year's freshman – students

must demonstrate proficiency in language arts, math, science, and social studies in order to graduate.

We believe that our Portland Promise to all families and students requires us to commit to a focused set of beliefs and evidence-based practices across all schools, regardless of model and context. We are committed to this because that's what great schooling is – not because the state requires it.

When it comes to standardized testing, our data continues to show that the performance of our students from more affluent backgrounds is on par with those of students in surrounding schools districts.

However, we have the most diverse student population in the state and we don't do as well with the students that make us so diverse. That's our call to action; that drives everything that we do. We are investing strategically to improve student outcomes to realize our Equity Goal.

Our district Equity strategy includes a districtwide effort to help our staff develop the cultural competency that will empower them to help our students. We are launching district Equity Audits; bias training for staff; and ensuring that our curricular resources are culturally responsive.

We are expanding student-learning opportunities as part of our Equity goal, to ensure that all our students have access to higher-level classes such as advanced placement and our talented and gifted programs.

We are proud that we consistently have a higher percentage of students with at least one 3+ score on an AP exam – as compared to not only Maine AP test takers but all AP test takers.

The school board passed some resolutions earlier this year that are designed to ensure we provide full and equitable opportunities for every student and family. One resolution condemns hate speech and expresses support for the district's Muslim students and staff. Another affirms the district's commitment to making the Portland Public Schools a safe haven for students and families.

The school board is in the process of approving a Transgender Student Policy, another important next step for inclusion and equity in the district. Hand-in-hand with our Equity goal is our Whole Student goal.

With the support of Portland ConnectEd and a generous \$100,000 seed grant from the John T. Gorman Foundation, we have launched a districtwide social-emotional learning strategy. We'll be providing social-emotional-learning professional development and support for schools and support for students.

We have taken other steps this year to support our Whole Student goal. For

example, Deering High School this spring outfitted female athletes with hijabs designed for physical activity. Deering is believed to be the first school in the nation to offer sports hijabs.

Deering Athletic Director Melanie Craig ordered the sports hijabs to encourage more Muslim girls to play sports. Participating in sports can build self-esteem and confidence, and such qualities as leadership, sharing, team spirit and tolerance.

We are also working to strengthen family partnerships by improving communication and by building authentic opportunities for families to participate in the learning process. To that end, the School Board earlier this year adopted a new district family engagement policy.

Starting in January 2018, the Portland Public Schools will be launching PPS Parent University. Research shows that parents can increase their child's academic success by being involved in their children's school and community. Parent U seeks to build relationships among families, educators, and the community.

That's an overview of our four goals. I'd like to take a moment here to express our gratitude to the wide variety of other community partners who support our efforts to realize our four goals. I'll cite just a few examples:

Our partnerships with organizations that include Jobs for Maine's Graduates (JMG), the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and Great Schools Partnership help boost the implementation of broader base learning opportunities for students.

The Portland Education Foundation (PEF) is another strategic partner. PEF's mission is to raise philanthropic support to enhance educational opportunities for students in Portland's public schools.

PEF support for our schools – which totaled more than \$350,000 in the 2016-2017 school year – affords a wide range of opportunities for our students and staff. Those opportunities include grants to our teachers to encourage academic innovation, creativity, and excellence.

Our students also benefit immeasurably from Culture Club-Portland, a public/private partnership involving PEF, the Portland Public Schools, the Portland Museum of Art, Portland Stage, Portland Ovations, and the Portland Symphony Orchestra. Through this program, we aim to have each of our students attend programs at each of the four participating arts institutions every year.

Some of our most important partners are you – Portland city councilors. A great city needs great schools, and it's clear to me and my colleagues on the board that the City Council recognizes that.

We're very grateful to the Council for supporting the Portland Public Schools' \$105

million budget for fiscal year 2018, which voters approved in June.

The budget was a responsible one with a modest 1.4 percent increase in spending in a very challenging budget year. The Portland Public Schools not only had to deal with standard personnel cost increases but also a potential drastic cut in state education aid.

Portland subsequently received an additional \$1.7 million in education subsidy from the state as a result of the final state budget. Thank you to the Council for recently approving the school board's allocation of that additional aid. As you know, \$1 million will go for reserve/tax relief and the remaining funds will be used for one-time expenditures, ongoing programming, and restoration of some cuts.

We are grateful to the Portland Legislative Delegation for their hard work in securing these additional resources.

Portland Public Schools currently receives approximately 15 percent of its revenue from the State. That is why, in closing, I want to express our deep gratitude to Portland voters for their support of our school system. This has been underscored by the annual budget vote, and most recently was underscored by the approval of the renovation of four of the city's elementary schools on Nov. 7.

I want to recognize that there were alternative visions on how to move forward with these complex facility issues that were also grounded in research and assumed the best interests of our students and our community. It was undoubtedly a contentious issue facing our community.

Nevertheless, the passage of this bond represents a historic event for our district. It is the culmination of a decade's work around a project originally titled "Buildings for Our Future," which sought to address significant deficiencies in Hall, Longfellow, Lyseth, Reiche and Presumpscot elementary schools.

Now, construction work on Hall, which qualified for state funding, is proceeding on schedule and that school should be ready to open next fall. Planning for the other four schools is about begin.

With Election Day behind us, it is now our duty to honor the voters' decision and to move forward in a fashion of togetherness. I pledge that the district and the school board will be good stewards of these projects and work hand-in-hand with the City and the public to fulfill the will of the voters.

The future of our elementary schools is now. We can look forward to the day when all five of those elementary schools are finally up to 21st century learning standards- helping us to fulfill our Portland Public Schools Promise.

It takes a community to ensure that we meet our commitment of preparing our

students to succeed in college and career. We are deeply grateful to Portland for being that generous and supportive community.

We strive every day to give this community - its residents, taxpayers, voters, and elected officials alike - a grand sense of pride in its public education system.

Thank you and good night.