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March 16, 2015

State of the Schools 2015

Sarah J. Thompson, Portland Board of Public Education Chair

Mayor Brennan, members of the City Council, guests and taxpayers here in the chamber and watching on television, I am pleased to present to you the annual State of the Schools address on behalf of the Portland Board of Public Education. Before I begin I would like to recognize my board of education colleagues who are with us this evening.....

Before I begin with my report, I feel confident in laying out a premise upon which I believe we all can agree – that the quality of our schools matters greatly to all of us who live in the City of Portland.

Quality schools matter to our students, whom we are preparing for colleges, careers and citizenship.

They matter to the parents of our children, who have hopes and dreams for each and every child in our district.

They matter to taxpayers, who are investing in our schools and who want to see our city grow and attract new families and businesses that will keep Portland vibrant and an affordable place to live.

They matter to the businesses that are located in our city, whose success increasingly depends on having a readily available pool of well-educated, skilled workers.

We are all in this together, and whether we have children in Portland schools or not, we all have a stake in the quality of our schools.

That is why I am pleased to report that Portland schools are in good shape and getting better all the time. The Portland Board of Public Education and the superintendent continue to work well together, maintaining stability and continuity in the running of the Portland Public Schools and sharing a commitment to be the best small urban school district in the country by 2017.

We enjoy a good relationship with our teachers, administrators and staff, and are grateful for the continued support of, and collaboration with, the Council and city staff.

As in the past, I have brought some fact sheets and reports that I hope you will review at your convenience.

I want to begin tonight by focusing on two things that I think speak to not just what we are doing, but how we are going about the business of educating Portland's children. They speak to our commitment to accountability and transparency in everything we do at the Portland Public Schools.

The first is the annual District Scorecard, the most recent version of which Superintendent Emmanuel Caulk presented to the board and the community in December.

The scorecard uses data from multiple sources to show where our students are making progress and where they are not doing as well as we'd like – areas where we need to make some investment in strategies for improvement.

The District Scorecard includes baseline data from the past two school years for student performance on state assessments in reading, writing, math and science and for English language learners' performance on the ACCESS test. It also includes data about student attendance, high school graduation rates, enrollment in Advanced Placement and dual enrollment classes, PSAT and SAT scores and other indicators of college readiness.

We report results for the district as a whole and for various subgroups such as White, Asian, Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latino, economically disadvantaged, students with identified disabilities and students with limited English proficiency.

Here are some areas where the scorecard shows positive growth: Grade 5 reading and writing; Grade 11 math; and SAT scores, with an increase in the number of students who scored 1550 and above.

But the data also show that some groups of students are not performing as well others. Third graders in the Black/African American and economically disadvantaged groups, for example, trailed well behind total scores for all district third graders in reading and math proficiency.

That's important to know because third-grade reading ability is seen as a key indicator of future academic success.

We also use the scorecard data to set performance targets for the current school year and beyond, and you can be proud that Portland Public Schools is leading the way in using data such as this to validate where we are succeeding and, perhaps more important, to identify problem areas early on and to make changes in time to get students back on the right track.



The second example of transparency and accountability I want to mention is our parent/student survey. Last year, more than 26 percent of parents participated in the survey and 50 percent of high school students participated.

Parents could take the survey online or by filling out paper surveys available at district schools. The surveys were available in English and seven other languages.

The results were very positive. Here is a sampling:

- When parents were asked if they felt welcomed or respected at their child's school, 95% of parents who expressed an opinion on that statement agreed with it.

When parents were asked if their children enjoyed attending school and if they felt the schools were safe, 94% who expressed an opinion on that question agreed with it.

- When asked if staff and administrators communicate effectively, 85% of parents who expressed an opinion agreed that they do.
- When students were asked if their school provides challenging and interesting courses, 91% of students who expressed an opinion agreed their schools provide such courses.
- When students were asked if there is at least one adult in their school they can turn to for support, 90% of those expressing an opinion said that is the case.
- And best of all, when students were asked if they plan to graduate, 95% of those expressing an opinion said that they will.

We are extremely pleased with the results. This year's survey is underway and we hope to have even more participation this year.

We also continue to reach out to the community in many other ways.

Superintendent Caulk gave an engaging and compelling presentation at the Portland Chamber's Eggs & Issues breakfast in June, in which he talked about how our schools are retooling to prepare Portland students for college and 21st century careers, infusing a global perspective into the curriculum and expanding STEM. He also invited members of the business community to get involved in mentoring and offering internships and job shadowing,

We also are pleased to partner with the Chamber on the "Principal for a Day" Program, which pairs business leaders with a school principal. From playground duty, to goal setting meetings, to discussing managing change with principals, business leaders have the opportunity to gain real insights into the challenges facing our school leaders. The program has fostered stronger relationships and ongoing partnerships with area businesses.



We also have created “Let’s Talk Portland!,” an online tool for ongoing, productive conversations between citizens and the Portland Public Schools about critical district issues and creating solutions for them. Let’s Talk! Is available anytime, anywhere, from any device, and every submission is read and carefully considered.

Our schools also are engaging directly with the broader community in many exciting ways.

The Portland Public Schools, in partnership with EnviroLogix, presented the first STEM exposition at Ocean Gateway last November. Nearly 1,000 students from all of our schools participated and students from several schools created special exhibits.

Another STEM initiative was the “Super Science Makeover” at Lyman Moore Middle School, thanks to \$18,000 and 300 hours of volunteer time donated by IDEXX Laboratories. New technology at the school includes Smart boards and digital teaching microscopes.

We are creating more and more opportunities for students to explore science, technology, engineering and math and develop the skills that are so important in the 21st century. Even with competition from charter schools, our schools offer the best opportunity for robust learning in science and math.

Our Ocean Avenue Elementary received a \$5,000 Toolbox for Educators grant from Lowe’s, which enabled the staff of Portland Trails to work with students, teachers and parents and volunteer to create a courtyard garden with raised beds, walking paths, and several seating areas where children can see the plants grow.

We are proud that Presumpscot Elementary is recognized as a “High Performance Reward School” -- one of just five schools in Maine that met all the criteria for closing the gap between students receiving services and positive outcomes. Recognizing Presumpscot’s success, the Maine Department of Education asked a team from the school to make a presentation at a professional development program in October.

Presumpscot also is one of 20 Maine schools to have demonstrated great progress toward meeting state and federal accountability standards for English language arts and math. In fact, the school, which has a high percentage of students living in poverty, has met all annual targets and is performing within the top 15 percent of Title I schools in the country at bridging the gap between low-income students and other students. Under Title I, The U.S. Department of Education provides supplemental funding to local school districts to meet the needs of at-risk and low-income students.

Casco Bay High School, which is in the process of growing from 280 to 400 students, continues to be recognized as a national leader. Its principal, Derek Pierce, received the Nellie Mae Foundation’s Third Annual Larry OToole Award given to a school leader who exhibits innovation in moving forward student-centered learning approaches.



The award came with an \$100,000 grant to CBHS which will be used for scholarships for annual learning expeditions, for supplies and equipment to create a “Maker Lab” where students can explore, design and invent, for micro-grants to students for projects that address local needs and for hosting visiting educators and holding workshops.

A number of other employees received noteworthy recognition over the past year. Here are just a few examples.

President Obama honored Karen MacDonald of King Middle School as Maine’s 2014 Teacher of the Year at a White House ceremony in May.

MacDonald was selected for that honor after an intensive process consisting of school visits by a review panel, professional portfolio review, oral presentations and interviews.

MacDonald has worked for the Portland Public Schools since 1978 and moved to King about 25 years ago. There, she has taught language arts and has also worked for four years as a teaching strategist. MacDonald earned National Board certification in English/Language Arts/Early Adolescence and an endorsement in teaching English language learners.

A year after MacDonald arrived at King, the school became an Expeditionary Learning school. She helped create a learning expedition about civil rights, titled “Small Acts of Courage”, and another expedition, “Lead On”, where the students work with artist Robert Shetterly to study leaders and their own leadership skills.

King Principal Michael McCarthy has said that in his four decades in education, “Karen MacDonald is the best teacher I have ever known.” She has touched the lives of more than 2,000 students during her years at King.

Gus Goodwin, another teacher at King was honored by the Maine Science Teachers Association in October as a “teacher who inspires student achievement in science in a caring, compassionate manner and makes enduring contributions to science education.”

Ron Adams, our Food Service director, won the School Nutrition Association’s Outstanding Director of the Year award for Maine. Local foods continue to be important to Ron and our Food Service program, and last March 600 students and staff learned more about locally grown foods used in our lunch program at a local foods showcase.

We are especially proud that ten teachers in our district have earned National Board Certification, something achieved by only 3% of teachers nationwide. To get the certification, teachers must analyze their teaching in the context of student needs, submit videos of their teaching, and provide student work sample that show growth and achievement. We are actively supporting and encouraging more teachers to become nationally certified.



We also have welcomed some important new staff to the Central Office in the past few months, including a new CFO and new directors for school management, transportation, IT, adult education and HR. All are serving us well, and we are currently conducting a search for a new Chief Academic Officer.

We also were pleased to recognize posthumously the many contributions of Amanda Rowe, longtime school nurse and advocate for school-based health centers.

The Portland High Health Center has been named in honor of Amanda, It is operated by the city's Public Health Division and recently received a \$225,000 capital improvement grant through the Affordable Care Act. All PHS students have access to the health center, regardless of their ability to pay for services.

Members of the School Board and the superintendent recognized recent retirees at a special ceremony in October. They represented a combined total of nearly 300 years of service, including a high school teacher with 39 years of service and several staff who spent 30-plus years serving the district.

We are fortunate to have great teachers and staff, but we also must have facilities that are safe, efficient and conducive to learning.

Our Building for Our Future initiative, which affirms our communities commitment to equity across our schools continues to address significant needs at our older elementary schools. We have conducted several studies over the past 15 years to identify deficiencies that detract from learning and to be able to make improvements in phases. We look forward to reaffirming the Council and communities commitment to the "Buildings for our future" plan.

Our greatest need continues to be a replacement for the nearly 60 year-old Hall Elementary School. Hall School funding is a part of the thoughtful "Buildings for our future" plan. The Hall School Building Committee, appointed by the City Council to oversee the design and construction of a new Hall school, has been working through the 21-step process that the Maine Department of Education requires for state-funded school construction projects.

During the past year we successfully re-located the district's Central Office to 353 Cumberland Avenue, along with our MultiLingual and MutliCultural Center and the West School program, transitioning to being known as the Bayside Learning Community, which serves students with behavioral issues. As you know, moving these programs has freed up much needed space on Allen Avenue for the growth of Casco Bay High School.

We continue to serve the needs of many adult learners and new Mainers in our community.

Portland Adult Ed and the Portland Arts and Technology High School partnered with the Windham/Raymond Adult Education program to create an Introduction to Precision Machining Technology Program



The one-year program gives students basic machining knowledge training, certification from the National Institute of Metalworking Skills and a WorkReady credential signifying that they have the specific skills and requirements that employers are looking for in their current and future employees

Portland Adult Ed also opened a New Mainers Resource Center at the former Cathedral Grammar School. The Center helps professionals from other countries find employment in their fields and assists Maine companies in finding skilled workers. The center offers career guidance, English courses related to specific professions, employer networking, job seeking skills and assistance with credentialing and licensing.

Also during the past year, the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. conducted the first audit of our English Language Learners programs. The audit has helped us identify strengths and areas where we can make improvement to boost proficiency.

The curriculum throughout our schools continues to be a major focus as the state moves towards adoption of the Common Core. Students in grades 3 through 8 and the third year of high school will this year begin taking the new Smarter Balanced assessment test that Maine will use for state and federal accountability under the Common Core.

A new four-year, \$1.9 million arts education grant from the U.S. Department of Education will provide students at Reiche, Ocean Avenue, East End and Riverton elementary schools with greater exposure to the arts through their everyday curriculum.

Known as “Project Imagine”, the grant award was announced by the USM Art Department and Side x(by) Side, an educational nonprofit formed two years ago by parents and artists to promote academic excellence through arts integration, increasing proficiency in math and reading and strengthening learning for all students.

As part of Deering High School’s international focus, Dr. Sima Samar, chair of the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission visited the school last year to speak about her work advocating for human rights, health care, education and women’s rights. And just this morning, Deering students heard from another internationally renowned guest speaker, Ruchira Gupta, a global leader in the fight against human trafficking. Deering has joined the International Studies Schools Network to prepare students for an increasingly globalized world.

Looking to our younger students, we are implementing strategies that include investing in early education to make sure all students come to school ready for kindergarten, increasing student and family access to pre-kindergarten, and improving literacy at the elementary level.

We also are increasing student learning time – adding 20 minutes a day or more than 46 hours of instruction time per year, continuing to extend the school year for students in primary grades who are reaching towards proficiency, and increasing high



school graduation rates. As you know, we also are in the midst of looking at adjustments to the start and end times of the school day for high school students.

To help more students achieve at higher levels, we are placing a greater emphasis on writing, conducting early screening to get interventions in place early and continuing to provide robust professional learning for teachers.

Our strategies to increase high school graduation rates include extended learning opportunities through community partnerships such as the one we have with “Jobs For Maine Graduates”, improved monitoring of student progress and early warning indicators of students who need extra help, summer programs, and improved high school transition efforts

Finally, I would like to say just a few words about our school budget. Superintendent Caulk presented the FY 16 budget to the school board last week. We will be reviewing it and sending it along to you in the next few weeks I know I don’t need to tell you how challenging it is to prepare a budget these days with so many cuts and so much uncertainty coming from the state, but I do want to echo what Superintendent Caulk said in presenting the budget to the school board.

This budget is austere and modest. It builds on the investments made in FY2014 and FY2015, with your support.

It ensures that all students have a pathway to success by closing the opportunity gap that has persisted so that a student’s demographic doesn’t determine his or her destiny. It allows students reaching toward proficiency to get there faster, and for students who are proficient and above to be globally competitive.

We are committed, as the Superintendent said, to putting students and families first, investing in our employees through professional development and maintaining competitive wages, and being fair to Portland taxpayers. “A great school district for a great city”.

Looking over the horizon in FY 16, we look forward to having the conversation with the council and community as we embark upon a strategic planning process to extend our Comprehensive Plan framework and continue the vision for the future of the Portland Public Schools..

Thank you again for giving this opportunity to report on the state of our schools. The members of the Board of Public Education and I continue to be excited by the great work that is being done throughout the Portland Public Schools. Working with our students, their families, our teachers, administrators and staff, we are helping to build the future of this great city, and we appreciate your continued support.

