

State of the Schools 2018

Anna Trevorrow, Portland Board of Public Education Chair

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Good evening, Mayor Strimling, city councilors, educators, and other members of our great Portland community. 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 fellow Board members who are here with us today along with our Superintendent and dedicated members of the Portland Public Schools' team (I also see members of Portland's legislative delegation. Thank you for joining us.)

I'm about to complete my second year as Board chair, and so it is my honor today to deliver my second State of the Schools address to you. I am pleased to say that the Portland Public Schools continues to offer a quality education to nearly 6,800 students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12, and nearly 4,000 Portland Adult Education students. In fact, I am proud to report that our district recently was once again named one of the top 10 school districts in Maine by Niche.com.

I'll be talking to you today about the significant strides we've made over the past year toward our Portland Promise goals.

However, I also will be talking about the very real financial challenges we face in making that progress. Both of my two years as Board chair have been marked by very challenging school budget cycles. We've seen decreases in state education aid, increasingly shifting costs onto local taxpayers. During the FY 2019 budget process, it became clear that changes in the state school funding formula and increased valuation for the city of Portland mean that the Portland Public Schools will most likely continue to face reductions in state funding.

This fall, we launched our new Enrollment and Facility Study. The purpose of this study is to get as much information as possible so that the Board can fulfill its fiduciary responsibility and commit to running a highly efficient school system. The Enrollment and Facility Study Commission, which includes Councilors Cook and Ali, will help us do that.

Here are some basic facts about our school system:

Our enrollment as of Oct. 1, 2018 was 6,784 students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12. That's on par with last year's numbers. We remain Maine's largest school district.

We have 18 schools – four high schools, three middle schools, 10 elementary schools and the Bayside Learning Community.

Our brand new Amanda C. Rowe Elementary School opened this fall. That school, which replaces the aged Hall School, mostly paid for by the state. We're very excited that the new building not only provides a 21st century learning environment for our students but that its larger gym and other resources also serve the Portland community.

As part of the school renovations approved last year, the process to renovate Lyseth Elementary School is underway. We have contracted with Harriman Architects to lead the project and the Board has recently appointed members to the Lyseth School Building Advisory Committee. We're planning to break ground next spring.

Portland Public Schools is the state's most diverse school district. One-third of our students come from homes where languages other than English are spoken—a total of 67 languages. Nearly 44 percent of our students are students of color.

We continue to be socio-economically diverse. Portland's property values are skyrocketing, but approximately half our students qualify for free or reduced school lunch.

Through Portland Adult Education, we served nearly 4,000 adults last year. True to its mission, PAE teaches academic and English language classes and runs a vibrant learning lab. Students work to earn a high school diploma or prepare for college or careers. Community members are able to better their lives through job skills and enrichment classes.

All told, Portland Public Schools' programs directly impact the lives of approximately 1 in 6 Portland residents.

We strive to ensure that all students receive a quality education. To that end, we developed the Portland Promise, which defines clear, measurable goals for the education of our elementary, middle and high school students.

The first goal is Achievement. That goal says that 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.

While standardized test scores remain largely flat, our overall Achievement metric for our graduation rate shows a continuing upward trajectory. In 2016, it was 84 percent; in 2017 it was 85 percent; and preliminary figures this year put our rate at 87 percent.

The Portland Public Schools continues its commitment to proficiency-based-learning because it aligns with our values as a school district. A focused set of beliefs and evidence-based practices across all our schools will not only help us realize our Achievement goal, but also the other Portland Promise goals.

Our district is proud to have many students whose academic achievements stand out.

Three of our high school students this past year became 2018 National Merit Finalists. One of them, Lucy Tumavicus of Deering High School, was one of just 11 Maine students to win a \$2,500 National Merit Scholarship and to become a 2018 National Merit Scholar.

This fall, three high school seniors were named 2019 National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists: Elinor Tierney-Fife, a student at Casco Bay High School, and Isabel Clayter and Lauren Paradise, both of whom attend Portland High School. Isabel serves as a student representative on the Board. They now have the opportunity to become National Merit Finalists and compete for National Merit Scholarships offered next spring. We're very proud of all of these students.

The Maine Department of Education recently announced Maine will now award students a Seal of Biliteracy that recognizes their achievement in language learning. In 2017, Portland became the first school district in Maine to present those awards. More than 40 high school students qualified by demonstrating mastery of English and at least one other world language. Already this year, about 40 students have signed up to work to achieve the Seal. Portland is proud to be a leader in this area because biliteracy is an important skill that makes students attractive to future employers and colleges.

Speaking of college, our approximately 500 high school graduates this past June collectively won more than \$1 million in scholarships and grants. They were accepted at a wide variety of colleges and universities throughout our nation and even abroad.

Our Equity goal states that the Portland Public Schools is vigilant in supporting each and every student's particular path to achieving high standards and rooting out systemic or ongoing inequities.

Our data shows that our financially advantaged students compete favorably with students from other school districts. And, research suggests, those students benefit from learning in the diverse environment that is the Portland Public Schools.

However, our most recent data also shows that our financially disadvantaged students continue to not have the same positive outcomes. We still have a gap in achievement for students of color and those who are learning to speak English. That gap is stark and standardized test score results released just today evidence no measurable improvement.

Our five-year target for our Equity goal is a 50 percent reduction in academic achievement and opportunity gaps. It is essential that we invest strategically to improve student outcomes to make progress toward realizing our Equity goal.

One of the ways we can do that is through universal pre-kindergarten. Research shows that access to high-quality early childhood education helps reduce achievement gaps. Students who experience quality pre-K perform better academically and go on to attend college at a greater rate.

We started our pre-K program in 2011 and have grown it steadily, but we still are not able to serve all families who want their children to attend.

Over the past year, the Board has actively participated in a community conversation about increasing access to high quality Pre-K. I'll take this opportunity to ask the Council to join us in that conversation and help us figure out how we can increase pre-K access— something that Portland can be proud of and that will help make a difference to all students down the road.

We have taken other steps over the past year to help put us on the path toward Equity.

Earlier this fall, the Portland Public Schools won a \$150,000 award from the Barr Foundation to better understand the academic experiences our high school students, enhancing our efforts to achieve our Equity goal. We'll be working with four other New England school districts to conduct comprehensive analyses of our high school student populations, share key learnings, and provide peer support.

We know that many of our students go on to postsecondary success, but we don't always understand the factors that lead to that success. This grant will enable us to

learn what experiences make a difference and with that knowledge target our efforts and resources so that all of our students have the experiences that breed success.

We launched Parent University this past January. Parent U has the financial backing of the Maine Community Foundation's People of Color Fund, the Margaret E. Burnham Charitable Trust, the Sam L. Cohen Foundation and the Frances Hollis Brain Foundation Fund.

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. Parent U recently held a session on teen vaping and substance abuse. Among upcoming topics is a December session on raising powerful and healthy girls and a January session titled: "Kids See Color: Talking to Kids about Race."

Last year, the Board unanimously passed the Transgender and Gender Expansive Students policy. This policy puts our Equity goal into action by helping ensure that Portland schools are safe, affirming and free from discrimination for all of our students. In light of recent reports about the intent of the federal government to roll back protections for transgender and gender-nonconforming people, this policy is more important than ever to safeguard our students. I'm proud of our Board and community for supporting it.

Also in the past year, the Board followed the lead of the Council when it set the school calendar for the 2018-2019 school year. We designated the second Monday in October as Indigenous Peoples' Day— a significant step toward promoting a more equitable perspective regarding our country's history.

As part of that, the Portland Public Schools is working on including Wabanaki Studies in our curriculum, in keeping with the Portland Promise's Equity focus. We are proud to partner with Maine's indigenous tribes to incorporate Wabanaki standards in our K-12 curriculum and lead the way for other Maine districts.

A third goal in the Portland Promise is Whole Student. That goal says that, in addition to teaching 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.

Our 2018 Family Survey reflects progress toward that target. The survey showed that 91 percent of families taking the survey reported that they feel welcomed in schools and feel like partners in their children's education.

Despite our financial challenges we were able to make progress towards our Whole Student goal with a stronger investment in meeting the social emotional learning needs of our students. We help students establish meaningful connections with caring adults through youth mentoring programs, extended learning opportunities and expanded social work at our schools.

Deering High senior Allan Monga, Maine's 2018 Poetry Out Loud champion, whom this City Council honored with a resolution earlier this year, exemplifies how we're trying to support our students in a variety of ways so they can use their diverse talents to excel and be a "whole student."

Allan is an asylum seeker from Zambia, who is lawfully present in this country and in our school district. He enrolled in Deering last fall. Eager to expand his learning, he entered the national Poetry Out Loud recitation contest.

Dedicated teachers at Deering coached him and Allan ended up being a standout sensation, winning at the local, regional and state levels. His next goal was competing in the Poetry Out Loud national competition along with other finalists from all fifty states. However, Allan was unjustly barred from the competition because he is not yet a citizen or permanent resident.

With the help of Portland law firm Drummond Woodsum, which took on his case for free, Allan filed a federal lawsuit to win permission to compete. The Portland Public Schools joined in his lawsuit because we felt very strongly that Allan should have the same opportunity to compete as other students.

A judge ruled Allan could compete at nationals. He didn't win but gave a powerful performance. His lawsuit resulted in a more important victory when the National Endowment for the Arts in August announced it would eliminate its citizenship requirement in the contest's eligibility rules. Now, immigrant students across the nation have the chance to follow in Allan's footsteps. We're proud of his accomplishments and proud of the role the district played in helping him achieve them.

Our Whole Student goal focuses on creating a safe school environment where students can learn free from trauma and stress and with appropriate support for their health,

safety and well-being. Another way we sought to move toward that goal this year was the Board's passage of a Resolution on Gun Violence Prevention.

That resolution followed the Feb. 14 shootings at a high school in Parkland, Florida, where 17 students and staff were killed. Our resolution called on Congress and state legislatures to prioritize the protection of students and school system employees by passing legislation that more effectively regulates access to firearms through measures such as closing loopholes in background checks and improving reporting of lost and stolen weapons; funding public- health research on firearms--related issues; and advancing mental health supports.

We are looking for ways to make our schools safer and this year's CIP request will include enhanced security at our high schools.

Our fourth Portland Promise goal is our People goal. Without a talented and diverse staff, we won't be able to achieve our other goals. We have committed to ensuring that our staff members have the skills and support they need to realize expectations.

Portland Public Schools is one of Portland's largest employers. We have more than 1,200 regular staff members.

We have many talented people on our staff, and they have the awards to prove it.

For example, Mallory Haar, an English language learner teacher at Casco Bay High School, recently was named the winner of three awards for outstanding teaching. She won a 2018 Lawrence W. O'Toole Teacher Leadership Award from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, which includes a \$15,000 grant, and is the 2018 recipient of the Education for the Common Good Award from Bowdoin College. She also recently was awarded a Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms grant.

Ms. Haar also was among four Portland Public Schools teachers to attain their National Board Teacher Certification last year in the content area of their expertise. NBTC is considered the gold standard in teacher certification. The three other NBTC teachers awarded in 2017 were Leslie Applebaum and Caroline (CeCe) Robinson, English teachers at Casco Bay High School; and Jena Kerns, grade 1 teacher at Longfellow Elementary School. The four join 10 other PPS teachers who previously earned the certification, bringing the district's total NBTC staff to 14. Our new inductees will be honored at Educate Maine's 21st Annual Education Leadership Awards event next month.

Also, longtime Portland High School boys' basketball coach Joe Russo was inducted into the Maine Basketball Hall of Fame in August, with an outstanding record. A PHS alum, Russo is the most successful coach in Portland High School history, and has led the Bulldogs for nearly three decades. Under him, the Bulldogs have amassed more than 400 wins, five state championships and seven regional titles, with exemplary sportsmanship.

We continue to work to increase the diversity of our staff to better reflect the diversity of our students and their families.

In the summer of 2018, Portland Public Schools successfully completed the second 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.

For the second year in a row, we had more than 40 participants. We expanded the program from five locations to eight locations across the district. This year, in addition to our classroom internships, we were very excited to offer a course to 18 of our adult participants that the Maine DOE recognized as fulfilling a requirement for Maine teacher certification.

This winter we look forward to linking our effort of diversifying our workforce with the launch of the Education Academy at The New Mainers Resource Center at Portland Adult Education. This is just one example of how TeachPortland continues to evolve each year as we look for new and unique opportunities to grow the program.

Here is a brief video featuring some of our TeachPortland staff. [SHOW TEACHPORTLAND VIDEO HERE]

That concludes an overview of our four goals. I'll take a moment here to gratefully acknowledge the many community partners (large and small) who support our efforts to realize them.

I also want to recognize the Foundation for Portland Public Schools, which recently changed its name from the Portland Education Foundation or PEF.

For the past three years, the Foundation has worked closely with our school district to develop partnerships and generate support for philanthropic investments. Examples include Unum's support of middle school summer programming, Envirologix support for

our STEM efforts, L.L. Bean's support of teacher grants, and the Stephen & Tabitha King Foundation's support for elementary school literacy resources.

We are deeply grateful for all the Foundation has done and excited about its aggressive plan for building capacity to raise additional, significant philanthropic funds. Thank you to the Foundation's board and Executive Director Kate Snyder!

We work closely with partners like the Foundation to leave no stone unturned in finding ways to increase revenues for the Portland Public Schools.

As another example, Portland voters will be asked tomorrow, Nov. 6, to approve Question 1 on the municipal ballot, to have our district join the Greater Sebago Education Alliance Regional Service Center or "RSC." If voters don't approve our joining the RSC, we'll lose almost \$100,000 in system administration funding from the state. If voters approve our joining the RSC, we'll retain that funding and be able to participate in potential cost-saving partnerships, such as a food service purchasing co-op.

Of course, important as this supplemental funding is, it can never replace the need for public investment in our schools.

As this Council knows, our fiscal year 2019 budget process was long and challenging, due to a drastic reduction in state education aid and rising fixed costs. Our budget, generously approved by Portland voters in June, is \$110.6 million. That was a reduction of nearly \$3 million from the superintendent's starting request. It also was a 4.6 percent increase over last year's \$105 million budget and required a 5 percent increase in the schools' portion of Portland's tax rate.

Even so, the board was faced with making decisions that impacted students, families and staff. They include a reduction in the student attendance year by two days; fewer electives in our middle schools; furloughs and reductions in pay for some staff because of the shortened student year; and a reduction of more than \$1 million in administrative supports that impact our ability to advance our Portland Promise goals.

This budget served to heighten awareness within the Portland community that we are facing, and will continue to face, complex funding dynamics. We must figure out how to not only support our current level of education but to improve it, while at the same time being cognizant of Portland taxpayers.

That is why, as we prepare for budgets for FY 20 and beyond, we have launched the Enrollment and Facility Study. Everything is on the table in this study. To look for

efficiencies, the study will include a review of demographics, facilities, enrollment, costs, programming, and transportation.

The goal is to have recommendations to the Board vetted through the Enrollment and Facility Study Commission by early 2019 and to hold public hearings before the next budget year formally begins in March. Important decisions about our schools, our school boundaries and our investments may result from this analysis. However, I want to stress that no decisions have been made yet.

We have conducted a community survey and held a series of neighborhood meetings throughout October to get feedback from the community about this study. At all these meetings, Portlanders have expressed their passionate support of Portland's public schools. The community has shown this same kind of advocacy by approving the school budget each year and by the overwhelming support of Portland voters last fall of the \$64 million bond to renovate four of our elementary schools.

The message from our community is consistent and clear: Portlanders want good schools and are willing to invest in them.

It takes the entire community to ensure that we meet our Portland Promise commitment to prepare all our students to succeed in college and career. We are deeply grateful that we have such a generous and supportive community. We are also grateful to the City Council and Portland's legislative delegation for their support. To move forward, we now all need to work together to find creative and sustainable solutions to ensure that Portland will be able to continue to offer all our students the quality education they need and deserve.

Thank you and good night.

