

Leadership

For many years Portland Public Schools (PPS) was characterized by weak leadership, both in the superintendent’s office and on the school board. After one superintendent was bought out of his contract in 2001, there was a failed search in 2001–2002. The school board was divided and fractious and perceived as unprofessional.

To turn things around, in 2003 the Portland Schools Foundation (PSF) and former school board members from the 1970s and 1980s formed a pact, working with the teachers union and Stand for Children to elect a new slate of school board members. In May 2004, four new members were elected to the seven-member school board, supporting an agenda for better leadership and the existing community-constructed strategic plan. PSF enlisted the support of the Broad Foundation to support this new slate of reform-minded board members and help them recommit to the 2000 strategic plan. Broad also helped board members learn what they needed to know and be able to do in order to hire a superintendent and set a collective strategic direction for the district to create a system of high-performing schools.

In 2004 the new board, with leadership support from PSF, launched a second national search, resulting in the hiring of Vicki Phillips, former Pennsylvania Secretary of Education, to build on the reform agenda they had adopted. In this session, we will look at how strong leadership quickly moved to dramatically improve the atmosphere in the school district and change the tone of the conversation about PPS in the broader community. Now the challenge is to implement changes in instruction, professional development, and central office, while broadening the base of community, civic, and financial supports. The new synergy between the superintendent, the board, and PSF will be critical to meeting these challenges.

Total Enrollment	47,656
European American	58.0%
African American	16.0%
Hispanic American	13.0%
Asian American	10.0%
Native American	2.0%
Not specified	1.0%
ELL	11.0%
Special education	14.0%
Free and reduced-priced lunch	43.0%

Demographic Information

Student Achievement

Achievement is on the rise. Portland is at or above state K–12 averages compared with all districts in the state, as measured by Oregon state assessments. Student test scores remain high at the elementary level, but further work and reform is needed at secondary levels. A persistent achievement gap persists between students of color/students from low-income families and their peers. Individual schools have shown dramatic successes; the challenge is to take that success and expand it to every school and every child.

The district’s elementary schools overall met all of their adequate yearly progress (AYP) benchmarks in the 2003–2004 school year. However, in the same year middle schools were only able to get European American, Asian

American, and Native American students to meet AYP benchmarks in English Language Arts (ELA). The high schools overall were unable to get any of their designated student groups to meet the AYP benchmark in math and math problem solving, and only European American and Asian American students reached the mark in ELA.

Superintendent Vicki Phillips and the school board are continuing the drive to be sure that all students have the opportunity to succeed. Next steps include:

- bringing greater rigor to the high school curriculum, with higher graduation requirements, continuation of the creation of smaller secondary schools, and expansion of the district's portfolio of secondary options, including use of a 7-12 model;
- making changes in middle schools, recognizing the need for stronger transition both from the elementary grades and into high schools;
- extending the existing strategic plan to guide the school district through 2010; and
- aligning and embedding professional development more strategically to assist teachers with reaching all students more effectively.

Major Challenges

Financial

Since the passage of a property tax limitation measure in 1991, the primary funding for K-12 education in Oregon comes from the state, which is highly dependent on a state income tax for revenue. For Portland, this has resulted in more than a decade of reduced funding in real terms. The current outlook is uncertain, with another possible reduction in state funding and the expiration of two local supplementary funding measures, posing the possible loss of almost 25 percent of PPS's \$400-million annual budget over the next two years.

Declining Enrollment

A lower birth rate and higher housing prices have resulted in a 5,000-student (10 percent) reduction in enrollment over the past five years, with a further 10 percent reduction forecast by 2010. The superintendent has recently announced proposals for a number of changes, including closure of six schools, several boundary changes, and the complete transformation of the structure of the lowest-performing region of the school district.

Central Office

The perception of weak leadership included a lack of faith in central office overall. Budget cuts eliminated 60 percent of central office staff over the last ten years, creating a capacity deficit. In 2004 the school board and PSF engaged the Annenberg Institute in a Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE) that produced five key recommendations:

- develop and communicate a service orientation;
- build centralized guidance and support for instruction;
- make collecting, organizing, analyzing, and acting on data a priority;
- provide support for schools and students based upon their needs and assets;
- address unhealthy relationships/ineffective structures across central office and with schools.

The school board decided to focus on supports for teaching and learning, data-informed decision making, and cultural proficiency. The new superintendent and board, in partnership with PSF and the Annenberg Institute, took immediate action to strengthen curriculum and instruction by conducting a teaching and learning review to inform future changes.

Community Engagement

Despite these challenges, Portland is a community that consistently supports public schools. More than 85 percent of Portland parents send their children to the local public schools. Voters have passed five different local funding measures to partially offset inadequate state funding.

The leading community partner for Portland Public Schools is the local education fund, the Portland School Foundation (PSF). This dynamic organization has been a key partner in mobilizing and engaging internal and external stakeholders around results-oriented reforms:

- **Funding:** PSF has had a critical role in all five of the local funding measures passed in the last decade.
- As an example of large-scale community engagement, PSF designed and executed a process that developed a five-year strategic plan for PPS in 1999–2000. More than 1,200 community members were involved in speak-out sessions and/or as Action Team members. PPS leadership did not have the management ability to implement the resulting strategies, which created a crisis of confidence in district leadership.
- **School board development:** PSF leadership helped recruit three of the new board members and connected the school board with the Broad Institute for vital training and support.
- **Grants:** PSF raises money locally and nationally to fund innovative projects in PPS, with a focus on student achievement in schools with a concentration of low-income and minority students.
- PSF was PPS’s partner in the central office review process and is supporting implementation.
- PSF was the agent for a planning grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York that was the catalyst for significant high-quality work toward high school reform.

The Presenters

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For More Information

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