

# PPS superintendent, board members tour schools

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Associate Editor

In early October, five of the seven Portland Public Schools (PPS) board members accepted a union invitation to tour district schools and see first-hand the work custodians and cafeteria workers do.

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503 organized the tours to humanize the workers in the eyes of decisionmakers. To the union's surprise, newly-appointed PPS Superintendent Carole Smith joined board members Ruth Adkins and Bobbie Regan on one of the tours Oct. 5 — Llewellyn Elementary in the Sellwood neighborhood.

SEIU is in bargaining over a new contract covering 287 full-time and 17 part-time custodians, plus 188 nutrition service workers. The union is proposing only a cost-of-living wage adjustment; custodian pay currently ranges from \$13.24 to \$22.69 an hour, while cafeteria workers make \$9.62 to \$13.96 an hour. The district, on the other hand, is demanding custodians give up almost one-third of their pay. Under the district proposal, the top-paid custodians would make \$15.52 an hour — a \$7.17-an-hour pay cut. And new hires would make \$2.54 an hour less than they do now.

"There's no way our members can take that kind of pay cut," said Mark Freimark, head custodian at Llewellyn and a member of the union bargaining team. Freimark, 46, makes \$19.55 an hour after 23 years at the district, and he's one of about 130 individuals who agreed to return when PPS offered reinstatement to in-house custodians it terminated en masse in 2002.

"We're hoping that for board members to see the work we do — and how it contributes to the learning environment — will make a difference," Freimark said.

At Llewellyn, with Freimark as guide, Smith and the two board members got an education. Earlier in the day board members visited schools where custodians are understaffed; Llewellyn was chosen as a counter-example. The school is noticeably clean, with grateful teachers, and students who have a connection to Freimark.

"Our building is clean for the first time in many years," one teacher tells the visitors. "I can concentrate on teaching, instead of cleaning."

"What's my name?" Freimark asks a class full of kids. "Mark!" they yell. "What do I do?" he asks another group, lining up after recess. "Clean the school!" they say all at once, except one boy who yells, "You're our waiter!"

"Waiter?" a board member wonders aloud. Freimark explains: At lunchtime, clearing plates before they end on the floor, he jokes with the kids: "Hi, I'm Mark, I'll be your waiter today." He opens their milk, cleans their spills, and reads lunchbox notes from



Llewellyn Elementary School lead custodian Mark Freimark (right) explains the workings, maintenance and safety features of the boilers to some of Portland Public School's top officials — from left, School Board member Ruth Adkins, Superintendent Carole Smith, and Board member Bobbie Regan.

parents for those still learning to read.

He also finds and returns coats left on the playground, hands out tissues, ties kids' shoes, or cleans and returns shoes when they step in dog poop.

Given the chance, Freimark talks with evident pride about his job. His day starts at 6:30 a.m. when he opens up the building, turns on the lights, and fires up the boiler. Next he lets the school cat out of the library, sets up the cafeteria for breakfast, runs the water in drinking fountains to flush the pipes, and checks his box for requests from teachers — more chairs, or something moved in a classroom. When it's light enough outside to see, he walks the playground picking up trash and sweeping bark chips back to where they belong. He goes online to see if the governor has ordered flags flown at half-mast for another fallen soldier, and hoists the flag in the proper way. He checks the boiler, drains the air compressor, helps out at breakfast, locks the building doors after school starts, and checks with the school secretary for special requests. Maybe a kid has thrown up in the hall, or he needs to let a delivery driver in, call maintenance, set up a table for someone. He sweeps the halls, empties trash cans, refills paper towel dispensers, scrubs and buffs the gym, climbs a steel rung ladder, opens hatches and checks roof drains to make sure they're unclogged.

"We have ownership of our building," Freimark says. "That's what 'custodian' means — custody. I'm responsible for the safety and security of this building and all its inhabitants."

On the way out to see the playground, the visitors pass a trio of

moms in the hall waiting for the bell to ring. Conscious of his audience, Freimark chooses his words carefully: "Have you noticed any differences in the school?" He doesn't say it, but what he means is — any difference since the district brought back its in-

house custodial work force, under court order. The moms don't need any prompting; an outpouring begins.

"Before, you never knew who the janitors were from one day to another," says one mom, the president of the school's fundraising foundation. "It's

just so much cleaner now," says another.

"It's like night and day," agrees Principal Steve Powell. "Now, we've got custodians that take pride in what they do."

Freimark can roll off with ease the names of the school's most famous graduates, or tell of the time he saved the school from a plague of mice. Freimark trapped 96 of them, and figured out where — in the 50,000-square-foot building — the mice were getting in. The holes were too big on the grate in front of an air vent. He put in a work order for a smaller gauge grate to be installed; problem solved.

Freimark was buoyant after the visit, saying he felt Superintendent Smith really listened.

"It's clear that he and the two other custodians take pride in keeping the entire school in tip-top shape," Smith said about the tour in a press statement published by the union.

Whether anything will change in bargaining remains to be seen. The wage cut proposal was presented before Smith was appointed.

Having met with custodians and cafeteria workers, will the new superintendent stick to the district's draconian contract proposal? Will board members endorse a one-third pay cut for workers like Freimark?

SEIU staff Representative Casey Filice said the union likely won't know if Smith intends to change course until at least the Oct. 23 bargaining session.

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