

Phillips Sees Better Schools in the End

Local closures, budget cuts make tough sell

BY KATHERINE KOVACICH
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

With all those affected by the recent plans to close six local schools, Vicki Phillips has become a household name. The Superintendent of Portland Public Schools is feeling the heat, but she's definitely not getting out of the kitchen.

"These are decisions that are tough and challenging and you'd rather not have to make them," Phillips said. "I wouldn't be a responsible leader if I chose to do that. Even in times of tough fiscal constraints and declining enrollment, my job is to make progress. I would be shirking my responsibility by not taking on the hard stuff. Is it painful? Yes. Does it make my heart hurt? Yes. But it's necessary."

The list of hits: Edward, Richmond, Smith, Applegate, and Kenton Elementary Schools, and Whitaker Middle School. All students will be merged into other area schools this fall.

Parents, understandably hesitant toward change for and movement of their children, also are in uproar concerning a possibility of \$51 million in budget cuts to Portland's educational system.

Phillips claims that resistance to school closures is something she

can understand through personal experience.

"One of the most heated times I've had with my sister was when my nephew's elementary school was closing," Phillips said.

Portland's top educator was working for the state of Pennsylvania at the time and her sister hoped Phillips could do something to change it.

"I understand how painful it is and have an understanding of being passionate about trying to really respect where they are coming from," Phillips said. "At the same time, my job is to take care of the students."

Phillips said she takes comfort in the fact that "we are moving kids to solid schools."

Phillips started out in rural Kentucky on a small tobacco farm. She was the first of her family to attend college, where she earned a bachelor of science in elementary education and later a master's degree in school psychology from Western Kentucky University, both with honors.

"While I got a good base in education, I was not encouraged to go to college. I got it by luck," Phillips said. "I believe kids should have it by design."

Phillips has been working within



PHOTO BY KATHERINE KOVACICH/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Superintendent of Portland Public Schools Vicki Phillips pledges her support to improve schools for low income and minority students while proposing school closures and budget cuts to offset declining revenues.

the education system for more than 20 years now, being involved with the Kentucky Department of Education, National Alliance for Restructuring Education, Children Achieving Challenge, Greater Phila-

delphia First Partnership for Reform, and as School Superintendent in Lancaster, Penn.

"People have held the bar very high and expected me to rise to the occasion," Phillips said.

The changes slated for Portland schools will not just mean big moves for the environment of students, but big losses for staff.

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- Vicki Phillips, Superintendent of Portland Public Schools

Across the district, more than 260 full-time positions could be cut.

"We're going to do everything we can to be generous with our leaves, to minimize the loss. A number of teachers are retiring," Phillips said.

She's quick to point out that this is not just an issue facing the city of Portland, but Oregon as a whole.

"I don't know what you say to staff or children with a state that refuses to tackle the real need here," Phillips said. "It's not just Portland's children undergoing change."

A recent Census study showed that Oregon ranks 31st in the nation for school spending. This results in nearly \$1,000 per-student below the national average. Oregon also ranked among the bottom-fifth of states for instructor salaries.

Declining enrollment causes schools to lose funding for each student not attending.

It may not be a favored decision, but "part of why schools are closing is to gain some stability so that we can provide every kid with the quality of education they deserve," Phillips said.

"In the case of middle and high schools, I think the thing we all agree on is that what's going on here isn't good enough for our kids," she continued.

As for concerns that bringing two schools together would mean less attention toward each student, Phillips noted that "larger schools don't necessarily translate to larger class sizes. Where we are combining, we still meet the definition of small schools."

She believes that despite the financial hardships the city is going through, the schools will come out better in the end with public involvement.

"One of the things that drew me to this community and that makes me continue to be delighted to be here is the caring and support that the community gives its children. By working together, we can create the kind of school system that Portland needs. Every classroom in every school has to be as good as the next," Phillips said. "I'm convinced that with the passion of the parents, these schools will be extraordinary."

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Let's Make Read Across America An Every Day Event

By
Reg Weaver,
President,
National
Education
Association

Kids who read – and kids who are read to – do better in school and better in life. It's a fact supported by research and the common sense wisdom of parents everywhere.

This week, more than 45 million students, parents, grandparents, teachers, education support professionals, and others are taking part in the National Education Association's Read Across America day.

But reading can't be just a one day event. Kids need to experience the joy of reading every day. It's more than a way of helping students in school. Family reading helps strengthen families. Strong families help build strong communities. Reading and lifelong learning are at the core of our founding generation's highest aspirations for the United States of America.

NEA's Read Across America is one example of NEA's work to make sure every child has a public school as great as America's best public schools. NEA's Read Across America events bring others into the school community who might not otherwise get involved. School-based and community-based Read Across America events draw community leaders, politicians, athletes, musicians and actors into contact with students and with schools. Some of those connections between community leaders and schools evolve into ongoing efforts to be engaged with the school year-round.

In the same way, it provides an opportunity to highlight what NEA knows works in the classroom – the same ingredients that are supported by research by parents and by teachers and education support professionals: strong parental involvement, qualified and certified teachers, small class sizes that allow for individual attention, and books and materials aligned with high standards – and high expectations – for every child.

So on March 2 – and every day – take a moment and read with a child. Visit NEA.org to find out more about how you can get involved in activities in your area.



Cardinal Eduardo Martinez Somalo from Spain swings an incense burner as Pope John Paul II's body lies in state inside St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican for public viewing.

World Pays Tribute to Pope

(AP) - Pope John Paul II's body was carried solemnly on a crimson platform to St. Peter's Basilica, past a sea of more than 100,000 pilgrims who waited for hours Monday under a blistering sun for a glimpse of the late pontiff before his funeral and entombment.

The world advocate for justice and morality died on Saturday, ending more than a quarter-century as leader of the Catholic Church. He will be laid to rest Friday in an ancient grotto hold-

ing the remains of popes through the ages, after a funeral to be attended under heavy security by President Bush and dozens of other world leaders. Up to 2 million pilgrims are expected in Rome to pay their final respects.

As cardinals in their red robes and caps filed past the Pope's body during Monday's ceremonies, bowing and crossing themselves, a long line of faithful, tourists and Romans who had packed St. Peter's Square slowly snaked into the basilica.

On John Paul's feet were a pair of the simple brown leather shoes he favored during his 26-year pontificate and wore on many of his trips to more than 120 countries - a poignant reminder of the legacy left by history's most-traveled pope.

John Paul was 58 when the cardinals elected him in 1978. He appointed all but three of the 117 cardinals entitled to attend the secret conclave electing the new pope, but there is no guarantee that his legacy of conservatism will continue into the new reign.



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