

at John Adams?

ing and research, and sent a long proposal to dozens of school districts across the country.

Portland Public Schools was game. Four of the Harvard group went to Oregon, where Adams was already under construction. After a year of planning, Adams opened in the fall of 1969 with 1,300 students.

"We called them 'the Harvards,'" said former Adams teacher Steve Anderson, who ran the gamut of staff positions at the school from the fall of 1969 to its closing day in the spring of 1981.

The Harvard students brought their influence to Portland via a presentation: "a model of what a high school should look like in the 1970s and beyond."

This ideal high school was one where students didn't get lost in the system. Core classes with smaller sizes established a personal connection between student and teacher.

The ideal high school integrated all areas of study, the "interdisciplinary studies" model. Adams teachers prepared the curriculum as a team, which resulted in a free for all with business teachers assessing grammar and math students relating equations to physical education.

"The model was 'let's tie this all together' and the focus was multiple issues," Anderson said. "Of course, in the 1960s and 1970s we had lots of issues."

Anderson noted this created more strain on teachers than at traditional high schools. During the first few years staff arrived around 6:30 a.m. daily, sometimes staying late into the night.

"I'd say 10 to 15 percent of staff left after the first two years," he said.

Another significant flaw in the ideal was that it was the conception of Harvardian minds, meaning the school modeled a large university and inherited problems that plague such sizable institutions.

"You'd walk in the door and probably 50 percent of staff were student teachers, interns or aides," Anderson remembered.

"The people from Harvard got

together and asked what type of high school would we have liked to go to," he said. "There might have been a disconnect between the idealist's high school and a practical, day-to-day high school."

Leaning toward the left

A classroom photo from a 1970 Newsweek article best described Adams' unstructured vibe: it captures a handful of students, some sitting in their chairs and some atop their desks, one girl wandering around and another boy gazing down at his hands.



The halls of Adams high were places to gather. Because the school had one of the most diverse student bodies in the state, racial tension existed, but never to the extent of the reputation the school couldn't seem to shake.

The photo caption reads "Portland's Adams classroom: An experiment in nobody saying 'no'."

Early Adams students were granted considerable freedoms, including their presence at faculty meetings and the ability to vote on school policy. But this lack of restrictions, coupled with their well-documented concerns for racial justice, soon sealed their reputation in a run-in with the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The conservative patriotic group traditionally presented new Portland high schools with American flags, and Adams was to be no exception.

But students, armed with their

political clout, rejected the flag based on the group's racist affiliations, and staged a walk-out that earned them labels like "black radical."

It was such incidents that upset the balance of a traditional, status quo school practices and riled conservative community members.

The DAR snub put principal Robert B. Schwartz in a bind — he had to accept school board policy and many were calling for his resignation, but he also had his students to answer to.

Students raised enough money

to buy their own American flag, and that may have earned them a sense of decision-making, but the episode resulted in Adams being labeled "the communist high school."

It wasn't just politics that fueled Adams' bad reputation. Attendance wasn't mandatory in the beginning, creating disorder in the halls when students should have been in class. On warm days they filled the adjacent Fernhill Park.

"A day of attending Adams was to sign in, then it was off to play," remembers 1976 graduate Jerry Shea.

Adams eventually became, at least in the minds of many who chose where to send their children, a com-

image.

"During the time I was there they didn't have riots," she said. "I heard it was utter chaos in 1969, with white middle class combined with lower income African Americans, at the height of when people were still figuring this out."

That "bad school" image stuck, and led to a decline in the number of families wanting to send their kids to Adams. Portland was also no stranger to "white flight," a nationwide demographic trend in which white, middle class families moved from non-white neighborhoods to the suburbs. That trend didn't begin to reverse until around 1990.

combination of chaos, voluntary attendance, fights and drug use and constant structural reorganization.

Even though the staff and district addressed these issues early on, in many ways fighting public perception was hopeless.

The district eventually tried to revert Adams to a more traditional school, but the damage done in the initial years was proved terminal, said 1974 graduate Mark McLain.

1978 graduate Jonica Perry remembers that her personal experience did not match the school's



John Adams was full of elongated walkways and even a catwalk from the main building to the second floor gym. "The part that was the most difficult for me was the long hall between the office area and the cafeteria," said 1974 grad Rex Goode. "It became somewhat of a 'gauntlet' with jeers from a lot of bored teenagers."

Adams did not lose students in a dramatic drop-off, but nonetheless enrollment declined slowly and steadily every year. Each drop affected the student-teacher ratio formula followed by the district. This meant for every 100 students who did not return to Adams, about four staff members lost their jobs.

When Adams lost its credibility it began losing its ability to justify the very educational model it was founded on. With a blight of staff there were not enough resources to maintain the "school within a school system."

The snowball was in full effect, despite annual improvements in terms of attendance, graduation and behavior.

The final say

As they lost resources Adams' staff was under fire to work harder, and became a magnet school in the mid-1970s. Still, they were not able to replace the loss of students because the strength of the programs had been eroded.

Adams spent its final few years flirting with the chopping block. The ax descended slowly in 1981, but retreated after a rally of community support led to a school board vote to keep the school open another year.

A mid-May board election changed everything, bringing new members with a new decision. Adams' fate was sealed when they reversed the positive vote, just weeks before the end of the 1980-81

school year.

So after a dozen years, Portland's newest high school ceased to exist, with any hope of Adams returning to what it once was, or what it could have been, extinguished with that final vote. All that remained was a misunderstood icon, frozen in the volatility of the 1960s and the idealism of the 1970s.

"We were the bad kids," Anderson remembers. "We were the opportunity, but also the embarrassment of the district."

In a school newspaper article dated Oct. 24, 1969, student writer Greg Hamilton acknowledged how misrepresented Adams had already become.

"Most of Portland has heard the rumors about that first day of school," he wrote. "Black students beating up on white students, white students calling names at black students for no reason at all."

It is likely that Hamilton didn't know how his next statement would sum up much of the Adams experience for the next 12 years, and ultimately lead to the school's demise.

"Some of the rumors were true," he wrote, "some were built up and lots was left out."

But in spite of its failure, part of Adams physically lives on in the curriculum created there, called "Extended Day Program," which later became the Portland Night High

continued ▼ on page A8

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