



PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Portland Public Schools is considering drastic changes to its high school system. The plans have big implications for embattled neighborhoods such as northeast Portland where high schools such as Madison (above) have experienced lower enrollment.

High Schools Do Over

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graphic region. Under this scenario, neighborhood high schools would not be geared toward specific career paths, but instead offer the same courses and electives. The third model would divide schools up into regions that would include a large school with lots of elective courses and smaller schools with specific educational themes. Large schools would have 1,000 to 1,200 students, and smaller schools would have 300 to 700. Students could tailor their education to

their interests by traveling to different schools, and would have the opportunity to earn credit off campus, such as attending Portland Community College. Currently students can transfer between neighborhood schools freely. As a result, some neighborhood schools have experienced declining enrollment over the years. For instance, Madison High School in northeast Portland had nearly 2,000 students in 2003. But five years later enrollment had dropped by nearly

half. Rumors sporadically emerge that some high schools with declining enrollment will have their doors shut—leaving communities jittery that they'll be left without a neighborhood high school. Closing any of Portland's high schools is a touchy subject, since they often are cherished social hubs for the communities they serve. Although Jefferson is the city's smallest high school at just 631 students, it has the highest percentage of students

from the surrounding area attending it of any school in the system. It's hard to get a handle on what each proposal will mean for embattled schools like Jefferson because they're meant to be conceptual and details have yet to be determined. It's also likely that the adopted plan will be substantially revised before being implemented. However, a look at each of the plans in their current state could spell out closures for some neighborhood high schools. According to PPS, there are about 11,000 high school students attending 10 public high schools, (not including alternative schools.) The first option would put 1,400 to 1,600 students on average in each neighborhood high school. Implementation of this plan would mean that

there would be 6 to 8 neighborhood high schools. The plan is silent on the number and size of magnet schools. The second option would put 1,100 students in each neighborhood school, and would have district-wide magnet schools that would include 400 to 1,100 students. This plan doesn't state how many neighborhood and magnet schools would be maintained, but even if there were just two magnet schools with 400 students that would mean that there would be 10,000 students attending neighborhood schools, resulting in a total of 9 neighborhood schools. It's worth noting that at the last PPS School Board meeting, board members brought up the possibility that some magnet schools could be housed in the neighborhood high schools. The third proposal would

have high schools in each region of the city serving 1,000 to 1,200 students and smaller schools serving 300 to 700 students. The process of redesigning the city's public high schools is far from over. Committee members are scheduled to meet with community organizations and are having public forums to hear community concerns. The next meeting is Wednesday, April 29 at 6:30 p.m. at Wilson High School. In June, Superintendent Carole Smith is slated to settle on one option, and begin implementing the changes in the fall. It could take five to 10 years to phase in. PPS spokesperson Matt Shelby said that the redesign could still go any direction at this point. "What we really want people to focus on is what's possible," said Shelby.

Candidate Looks to Correct Deficiencies

Outlines school board priorities

BY JAKE THOMAS
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Working as an economist, Scott Bailey spends his days counting beans and crunching numbers.

But Bailey, who is running for a seat on the Portland Public School Board that is being vacated by Sonja Henning, realizes that not everything that happens in the classroom can be easily quantified.

The parent-activist from Grant High School of northeast Portland recently sat down with the Portland Observer to discuss his plans to get kids real life skills and correct deficiencies in the school district.

Bailey stressed that getting students engaged in more hands on activities will give them marketable skills and also connect them to the community.

"Look at how we teach math to kids," he said. "We are teaching math the same way, essentially, we've done forever: as if everyone is going to become a professional mathematician."

Instead, schools should teach subject matter with a practical application in mind, said Bailey.

For example, he pointed to Jefferson High School initiating a hands-on sustainability project in recent weeks, and a project his son was involved with at Grant High School to dig bio-swales.

Such projects, said Bailey, could help kids get jobs in the area's burgeoning sustainable energy sector and put them in better touch with the community.

"Boy, when adults see kids doing good stuff, it has a really positive effect," he said. "Kids have so much energy; let's channel it in positive ways."

However, Bailey was vague on how to be so innovative when much of a school's curriculum

seems focused on standardized tests, which he says have shortcomings.

"We don't do a very good job of assessing what kids are learning in the classroom," he said. "The state test is not a very good diagnostic tool."

Bailey explained that as a school board member he would take a two-pronged approach to schools: He would give them more autonomy so that they can try new approaches. But in some areas, he thinks there needs to be solid plans in place to improve them.

He called for a re-vamping of the process to hire principals, which would bring in students, staff and parents into the process. He also said he would push to have concrete plans to improve each school.

Bailey also said that PPS is out of compliance with its Talented and Gifted and English as a Second Language Program, and there needs to be a plan to deal with both.

Part of the problem with TAG, according to Bailey, is that minority and immigrant students don't get recognized.

"Too often I think we have teachers who look at a kid and have lower or higher expectations just based on their color of the skin or what country they come from," he said.

But that's not the only issue facing minority students, said Bailey. Minority students are also suspended or disciplined at a much higher rate than white students. There is also a glaring achievement gap between minority and non-minority students.

Bailey said that part of the issue is cultural, with teachers misinterpreting the behavior of



Scott Bailey

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