

Staffing Plans Upend King

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a traditional neighborhood program, which is enrolled through boundary designations. The two strands are funded separately and have widely different enrollment figures.

“Hidden in the averages, what you don’t see, is that our neighborhood strand looks to have very large classes, a single class for each grade,” said King PTA Vice President Megan Newell-Ching. “The actual situation that we’re looking at next year for our Fourth and Fifth grades is going to be 30 students.”

Next year the Mandarin only side is projected to have class sizes ranging from 15-25, while the English only side will have class sizes from 23-33, school Prin-

icipal Jill Sage told the Portland Observer. There are currently 125 students in the Mandarin program and 174 on the English only side and those figures are likely to be flipped next year, she added.

Newell-Ching said the new formulation was supposed to support the district’s equity goals, but instead they continue year after year policies that “have led up to the situation that we’re in now. I mean, that’s not equity.”

Over the years the district has applied a number of “bandaid fixes” to the school which has struggled with low performance levels in the past, Newell-Ching said, like implementing King as a Turnaround Art school and then abandoning the program prematurely. A Mandarin immersion language program within the

school in which half the lessons are taught in English and half in Mandarin, from Kindergarten on, was started at the school in 2014. The school is also designated as an International Baccalaureate program, for all students.

The district’s equity goals provide for the maintenance of reasonable class sizes and baseline academic program offerings at every school. Staff re-allocation decisions should consider school stability “in schools that have been historically under-enrolled,” according to the policy.

Precise allocations of staff won’t be locked down until next fall when enrollment figures will be known. The staff that gets cut from one school may very well end up hired at another school, like one of the two new middle

schools opening next school year, Harriet Tubman and Roseway Heights, PPS media relations specialist David Northfield told the Portland Observer.

80 students are projected to be leaving Martin Luther King Jr. School and moving to one of the middle schools next year, bringing the total enrollment to around 310. School administrators have said King will also likely lose at least three staff members of color due to the reallocation, according to the school’s PTA President Shei’Meka Owens.

King Elementary has the smallest catchment area in the district—the geographic area from which enrollment is derived—and been under-enrolled for many years now. In fact, many parents who want their child to attend the school in the surrounding community, sometimes just 3-5 blocks away from the school, have resorted to using a friends’ address within the catchment area to get in, Owens said.

In the 2000-2001 school year, King had a robust enrollment of 733, a number that steadily went down through the years, according to a 2015 Portland Public Schools informational video, “Growing Great Schools.” By fall of 2017 their enrollment was only 390.

Redrawing of schools’ boundaries, which has been in talks district-wide since 2014, was supposed to help ameliorate MLK School’s under-enrollment issue and hence provide more staffing.

The enrollment balancing effort was formulated to accommodate city-wide population growth across the district that is continuing to occur to this day. But the School Board has postponed such changes time and again in the face of periodic backlash with individual school communities.

“It’s a complete failure of leadership on the part of the district that they haven’t done the enrollment balancing. And frankly it’s because they’ve listened to the loudest voices, which are the parents from higher socio-economic status schools,” Newell-Ching said.

Any enrollment balancing efforts the school district attempts now will likely occur after the staff cuts take place, Newell-Ching said.

The parent leaders suggest a couple of ways the school district could help mitigate possible understaffing at MLK School going forward, the first being dedicating unassigned staff, which the school district keeps a pool of on reserve, to the school and other small, under-enrolled schools like it.

“And then the other thing is they could put legs on their continued promise to address our boundary issue. We need to see action, we need to see them begin the process of doing what they need to do to change the boundary,” Newell-Ching said.

“We’re asking to have not just a real conversation, but some real movement,” added Owens.

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