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Portland Superintendent Carole Smith will answer high school redesign questions Friday

By **Betsy Hammond**, *The Oregonian*
March 01, 2010, 3:43PM



Stephanie Yao Long/The Oregonian

Portland Superintendent Carole Smith

Portland Superintendent **Carole Smith** will be the featured speaker at the **City Club's Friday Forum**.

Smith has agreed to **answer hard questions** from Oregonian education reporter **Betsy Hammond** about the **wide-ranging plan** to change the city's high school system from one that offers a lot of choice and variety -- along with a striking lack of equity for low-income and minority students -- to one of same-sized comprehensive high schools in every part of the city.

It's a hot, hot topic. One to three high school **could close**; the city's biggest high schools would lose teachers; attendance boundaries would be redrawn; the ability to transfer between high schools **could end**. If changes aren't made, glaring inequities in access to advanced classes, second languages and a full array of arts classes and programs will continue to be the norm in Portland Public Schools.

What is the key question you think Carole Smith should answer Friday to help inform the broader Portland community about her plans and about the best path forward for high schools in Oregon's largest school district?

- **Betsy Hammond**

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Posted by **housejunkie**
March 01, 2010, 6:14PM

The K-8's have failed to deliver an equitable education for sixth to eighth graders over a traditional middle school education; yet four years later, these inequities have still not been addressed and there have been no consequences to those implementing the K-8 plan. If the High School Redesign plan fails to raise graduation rates and close the achievement gap, what will Superintendent Smith promise to do to be accountable? Will she resign? Will she fire staff? Will she admit that she made a mistake? So far, we have see nothing in her character to suggest that she will be accountable.

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Posted by **brownman**
March 01, 2010, 6:29PM

Betsy - here are a few burning questions I feel should be asked (and answered). I will likely be at the City Club Friday to hear Ms. Smith answer these:

- If one accepts the premise of current inequities in the school system, what specific evidence are you providing that the changes being proposed will actually solve the stated problems?
- On a related note to what specific outcomes are you committing? What % increase in graduation rates are you committing to, in what timeframe? What specific measures of socio-economic diversity are you promising?
- Finally, what the the consequences, if the desired outcomes are not achieved? How does Portland hold you accountable?
- Do you have a job offer from The Gates Foundation as a backup plan?

Thanks Betsy.

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Posted by **ktrujillo**
March 02, 2010, 7:19AM

- Do you have a job offer from The Gates Foundation as a backup plan?

Does X Botana?

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Posted by **Dave Porter**
March 01, 2010, 10:51PM

The three questions I would like asked:

What is the redesign plan for the high school foreign language immersion programs?

When will there be PPS high school study abroad program in which PPS pay study abroad fees for PPS high school students to spend academic years abroad?

When will PPS pay for online learning courses that PPS high school students can take for credit completely outside the traditional bricks-and-mortar high school?

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Posted by **kathypw11**
March 02, 2010, 12:30PM

I don't see that the District will ever pay for students to study abroad while in HS. Wouldn't it be better to reduce class sizes than to let a lucky few study abroad on the District's dime?

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Posted by **Dave Porter**
March 03, 2010, 11:39AM

Study abroad could be widely available for high school students. It need not be only for the "lucky few."

It need not cost any additional dollars to send high schools students abroad. For examples, using dsate from the Oregon Department of Education's Open Book website for a recent year, Portland's per pupil spending was \$9,442. There are lots of existing study abroad programs that cost less than that, and, if students and parents can match some of the expenses, even more options become feasible.

Consider the 2009-10 fees of existing study abroad organization for an academic year abroad. Few usually include tuition, room and board and international transportation.

For example, ASSE (American Scandinavian Student Exchange) provides academic-year study abroad programs starting as low as Mexico for \$4,900 and French Canada for \$5,400.

Portland based Education, Travel and Culture offers academic year abroad programs with fees ranging from to \$5,500 to \$7,950, not including airfare, from countries ranging from Brazil to Sweden. Their fee for China is \$6,950 (plus airfare) for an academic year. Portland based Andeo offers an academic year in Mexico for \$6,000 plus airfare.

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Posted by **baddogcarl**
March 01, 2010, 11:48PM

Questions: Doesn't 'redesign' delay accountability for at least another five years? Who is being held accountable for the current state of affairs, which is so abysmal as to require clearing the deck and starting from scratch? Who will be held accountable when the new plan fails?

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Posted by **ktrujillo**
March 02, 2010, 6:48AM

Is there any precedent for the changes being suggested? Have any similar urban districts returned to a large comprehensive high school model with a limit on choice/transfers and seen an improvement in diversity or achievement?

If so, where? What were the favorable outcomes?

If not, how can you expect PPS families to support another reorganization of this magnitude considering the poor outcomes and lack of accountability surrounding the the last redesign (K-8)?

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Posted by **PDX Citizen**
March 02, 2010, 1:02PM

Is there a point at which lack of community support would cause you to step back from the plan? Or is the School District prepared to force the redesign on an unhappy and unwilling community?

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Posted by **realconcerned**
March 02, 2010, 6:56PM

I remain at a loss for an explanation of any need for vast structural upheaval to deliver a decent education and special programs to address the dropout rate and achievement gap. So I have to ask "what unstated goals of the redesign exist?" Is it money? No - that's on the table albeit all wrapped up in other words.

- * Is it No Child Left Behind?
- * Isn't it really NCLB (and Benson) rather than the fictitious "liberal transfer policy" that drain the so called "go from" schools?
- * Are there more NCLB sanctions coming down in 2011 that drive the rush?
- * Is the closure and reshuffling plan part of an effort to avoid the next round of NCLB sanctions at failing schools? Will that restart failing schools NCLB "clocks" or alter their demographics to get them out of NCLB sanctions?
- * Is PPS' strategy to hide the kids at risk and minorities in the statistics of "new" schools that have been socio-economically gerrymandered to produce better statistics? I don't see anything in the staff resolution that will actually help these kids.
- * And back to money - how does NCLB money enter (or leave) the equation depending on how PPS structures its redesign shuffle?

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Posted by **cynthiafnewton**
March 03, 2010, 9:38AM

The Resolution has two parts. The first part describes our current high schools and an achievement gap between white and mainly black students and school demographics, enrollments, funding and transfer policies. It also describes community comprehensive schools (neighborhood schools) and focus schools (magnet schools).

The second part of the Resolution describes actions PPS "shall" take to change our current high schools to fix identified/perceived concerns.

I went to the Board meeting with many questions about the Resolution.

What I learned is that your elected Board members also have many questions. I list a number of them here:

1. The Resolution states that enrollment in PPS high schools is declining and will decline. How do we know this? What about the bulging elementary school enrollment, crowded elementary school classrooms and families moving into neighborhoods which now have lower priced homes?

2. The Resolution states that there is a 20-50 percentage point achievement gap. For what years? Are the numbers getting better, getting worse or staying the same?

3. The Resolution states that keeping our 10 current high schools open will cost \$4.5 million annually. How much will it cost to change this? How much will it cost to close one or more neighborhood schools, or close neighborhood schools and reopen some as "focus" schools? How do the costs compare?? The reconfiguration of elementary and K-8 schools a couple years ago was made in part to save money, but did it?

4. What curriculum would be included in a "comprehensive community school"? What data supports the assertion/presumption that PPS cannot operate a community comprehensive school with less than 1400 students?

5. What curriculum would be included in the "focus" schools? Is this simply a way of saying there would be two accelerated curriculum schools which would draw the "best" students from across the city? If so, is that what we are trying to create?

6. If we create a new set of neighborhood schools are we going to allow students to transfer outside their designated neighborhood school boundary? Would the new system truly provide "equal" schools or would it result in a number of unique neighborhood schools such that students would still want to transfer to another neighborhood school? Would that simply re-create our current situation?

7. One of the agreed-upon solid schools is Grant, and it has an achievement gap despite its model efforts. How do we know that creating several more of these neighborhood schools will close the gap better than the system we currently have in place?

The School Board is scheduled to vote on this Resolution this coming Monday, March 8, at its evening meeting. Before this Resolution is acted on we need answers to all these questions--and more.

We need to answer these questions before any new plan is adopted. As one Board member put it at the February 22, meeting, we need to know this information so we do not simply "rearrange the deck chairs," moving our students from one school to another with no assured improvement.

As the parent of two Portland public school children headed for high school I urge all of you--parents, community members and taxpayers alike--to voice your opinion with School Board members and other elected officials. Let them know your concerns. Let them know that a decision on this Resolution with this multitude of unanswered questions is unacceptable.

One parent recently put it well when she said "Each of us has only one chance to educate our children and we all want to do the best job we possibly can."

Let's hold our elected School Board members to the same standard.

Sincerely,

Cynthia F. Newton
NE Bryce St.
Portland, OR 97212

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