

# Portland public schools' fiscal frailties

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Most of Portland's issues are because of money. Gentrification pushes out the poor people, minimum wage no longer prevents poverty, homelessness is a result of expensive housing and loss of work, and a profitable sex market drives Portland's uncontrollable human trafficking trade. Money has also affected the students of Portland, detracting from their inalienable right to a standard education. Bureaucracy within Portland Public Schools- a disproportionate amount of administration- and an above average amount of PPS staff paid high wages, have confused parents and students alike when it comes to our educational finances. Why was I never offered algebra in 8th grade? What happened to shop class? Why doesn't my daughter's school have a music program? Questions like these are commonplace in our district, especially in the neighborhoods with lower performing schools.

Here's why: after a series of questionable budget decisions, \$578.6 million of PPS allowance buys Portland schools where wealthy parents pay for a proper education and poor parents are left with underserved children. Portland Public Schools stands out in the crowd of school districts of the metro area for the way it handles money: salaries and staffing just don't match up with the rest of the districts. In 2011, The Oregonian released an analysis of PPS salaries and discovered incongruencies between the structures of PPS and its neighboring districts. The results are: "Portland stands out by retaining a thicker tier of midlevel managers and coordinators, and by awarding most teachers extra pay" (Hammond).

And because of tight budgets due to the recent economic recession, scrutiny and criticism ensued. The president of the Portland Association of Teachers, Gwen Sullivan, blamed the district rather than the teachers or their union for <https://assignbuster.com/portland-public-schools-fiscal-frailties/>

the way teachers are paid. Beyond the top of their pay scale, teachers in PPS have opportunities to significantly increase their salary, which puts PPS ahead of its surrounding districts in terms of its levels of high paid teachers. After the Portland district decided to pay 61 teachers extra for “ special assignments,” Carl Meade, superintendent of the Beaverton school district responded by saying, “ I’m not sitting in a position where I can staff anything like that,” because, “ We are trying to keep as many teachers as possible in the classroom” (quoted in Hammond). As Beth Slovic and Anthony Macuk point out in The Willamette Week article “ See How Portland Public Schools’ Administrative Salaries Have Increased Since 2007,” the count of employees earning \$70, 000 or more has risen 50% since Carole Smith became PPS superintendent. Consequently, anger and blame is often directed towards her and her board for shortcomings in the classroom, forcing parents to make up some of the financial slack.

In order to augment the financially deprived education of their children, some parents in the Portland district raise large amounts of money to pay for the arts, music and a fuller teaching staff. Parent-teacher associations at schools like Richmond and Sunnyside “ have formed nonprofits to raise in excess of \$75, 000” and use that money such that it doesn’t require sharing with lower income schools (Monahan). In PPS, when a school raises money to supplement its staffing roster, some money is set aside by the district for poorer schools. One third of the money raised by a school, after the first \$10, 000, gets set aside when raised for such purposes. To evade this system designed to ensure education equality, money can be donated not to the school which ultimately receives it, but a third party that pays for things like

artist residencies and classroom supplies. This is the case at Ainsworth Elementary in southwest Portland, the location of a prestigious Spanish-immersion program.

At Ainsworth, “ the Spanish program...receives money from a separate nonprofit, which doesn't share its funds and yet hires three interns from Spain and Latin America to work for a year in classrooms”(Monahan). In this way, parents can bolster the education experience of their children whilst evading the education-equality-supporting ‘ Robin Hood’ like system needed by low income schools to maintain their own success. Lower income schools end up deprived, unable to deliver an education as their wealthier counterparts can.

The budgets at these schools do not get enriched in the same way that the budgets of affluent schools do, and the resulting budget deficit impedes the ability of many students to accelerate their learning. This is strikingly evident for eighth graders of Portland as they progress in math. At King K-8, a resource shortage leaves its students that are apt for Algebra their eighth grade year with a choice: commute to another school for the class, or do without (The Oregonian Editorial Board). Yet, as the Editorial Board points out, the kids that would have to take the responsibility for their own education are the ones already burdened with low income households. Such problems with resources in low income schools persist despite government support, including Title I, a support program receiving federal grants that aims to help students on free or reduced lunch (Portland Public Schools). This lack of education could very well be a reason alumni of low income schools stay low income.

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As awareness of Portland Public Schools' structure, salaries, and resources grows, so will criticism, bringing change. A classroom where both wealthy and poor students can thrive is achievable if in-class spending is prioritized by the Portland district. Until then, Portland will continue to stick out as a school district with a unique budget and an educational dissonance between its affluent and less fortunate students.