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### ADVERTISEMENT

## High school reform: Writing success across all of Portland

By **Guest Columnist**  
 January 19, 2010, 9:00AM

By Xavier Botana



Xavier Botana

Portland's high schools need to change. Today, too many students don't graduate, too many graduates struggle in college and too many students lack equitable access to the core elements of a high school education.

A recent editorial in The Oregonian ("Sweeping plans in Portland deserve a skeptical eye," Jan. 4) worried that families "will not send their child to a school they perceive as low-quality unless they have no other choice."

At Portland Public Schools, we agree.

That's why our current plans would guarantee a well-rounded core program at each community high school. And those plans aren't based on wishful thinking -- they're realistically budgeted, based on current resources and forecasted enrollment. They're also based on what today's students need.

What if students gifted in writing, science or math could demonstrate proficiency and move on to more challenging material? More students could test their upper limits and be better prepared for college.

What if students could see counselors more easily to get help making responsible school, career and life decisions? Fewer might drop out.

What if high school students could take rigorous courses online or after school? More students might take college classes or recover missed credits, without waiting for summer school and dropping through the cracks.

No matter what Portland's high schools do well, none offer these kinds of challenges and supports today.

It's not enough to say, "Just fix the broken schools." We've tried. But no school stands alone. Subsidizing low-enrollment schools drains resources from high-enrollment ones. That's why we need to stabilize enrollment by making all of Portland's high schools attractive options to our families.

Under the proposed plans, every community high school would deliver a full array of college-prep and catch-up courses, languages, visual arts, choir, instrumental music and theater or dance. All would foster stronger connections between students and teachers in ninth-grade academies, which have been shown to prevent dropouts.

To offer the program to all, our high schools would each have an enrollment of about 1,350 students. Some schools would grow; some would shrink slightly.

What would larger high schools lose? If Wilson High downsized from 1,480 students to 1,350, it could lose approximately 18 of its 283 course sections, depending on staffing choices. Roughly six of these would be elective sections. Since each course averages two sections, losing six could mean a loss of three electives.

These are small but real tradeoffs. They're also necessary to bring a high quality education to all.

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No one is proposing cookie-cutter schools. Successful programs (such as Franklin's Mock Trial program) need not go away. Nor are we proposing to eliminate things that set Portland apart, such as our innovative language-immersion programs. We are discussing with educators and parents in language programs how to improve, not diminish, the quality and accessibility of immersion in our high schools.

We don't presume that input from 10,000 Portlanders constitutes buy-in. Many at our community meetings had questions. That's the point of the meetings. We're not presenting a done deal.

Can we pull off our plans? Ten years ago, Cleveland High suffered from a less-than-stellar reputation. Cleveland instituted a rigorous college-prep program, ninth-grade academies and Mandarin immersion. Now it's a thriving, high-demand school.

Success stories like Cleveland's show that a strong program and dedicated staff, principals and families can turn around a school. These are the kind of success stories we want to write across Portland. That's not wishful thinking.

*Xavier Botana is chief academic officer for Portland Public Schools.*

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Posted by **cb**  
January 19, 2010, 8:06PM

sorry Housejunkie. Don't know why I wrote "Housebound," except for maybe I've been glued to this issue on my computer.

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Posted by **Dave Porter**  
January 19, 2010, 9:47AM

Xavier Botana mentions several what ifs and discussions on the future of immersion programs. For me, the what if about access to online courses (especially foreign languages) and whether immersion foreign language programs are strengthen are crucial. I've not yet seen enough in the developing proposals to make an informed judgment. But I'm worried. For example, I've not yet seen any discussion of whether the PPS should have a Go Global High School Study Abroad Program. Of course, it should.

I'm also worried that the district may plan for one too many high school buildings. See my own post "PPS is planning for one too many high schools" at [http://daveporter.typepad.com/global\\_strategies/2010/01/pps-is-planning-for-one-too-many-high-schools.html](http://daveporter.typepad.com/global_strategies/2010/01/pps-is-planning-for-one-too-many-high-schools.html).

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[Inappropriate comment?](#) [Alert us.](#)[Reply to this comment](#) | [Post a new comment](#)Posted by **Kelly Sugg McDonald**  
January 19, 2010, 10:07AM

I completely concur that high schools need to have enrollment equalized, and that severely limiting transfers is essential towards this end. That said, I oppose the current PPS proposal to create 'magnet' high schools for the following reasons:

1. They have a negative environmental impact
2. They 'cream' from the top of other schools
3. There may be EXPENSIVE & TIME-CONSUMING unintended consequences (ie. the neighborhood may actually not want a 'magnet' school due to increase in traffic congestion and inability of their own children to be unable to attend the closest school because it is now a magnet)
4. As to the argument that magnets retain students who would otherwise 'go private' -- this is a negligible amount in our current economic climate when folks are actually pulling kids out of private due to job losses, etc.

I encourage PPS to show you 'heard' the fears of those worried you're biting off more than you can chew by tabling the designation of magnets for another time, and leaving some room in the limited budget to address inequities between middle schools and K-8s. By eliminating the time-consuming task of creating these new magnet high schools, you will (and must) have the time and energy needed to address the academic inequities the K-8 model has created.

[Inappropriate comment?](#) [Alert us.](#)[Reply to this comment](#) | [Post a new comment](#)Posted by **cb**  
January 19, 2010, 10:08AM

"Nor are we proposing to eliminate things that set Portland apart, such as our innovative language-immersion programs. We are discussing with educators and parents in language programs how to improve, not diminish, the quality and accessibility of immersion in our high schools."

This is new...I remember distinctly the design staff stating that immersion was on the block and that each community high school would offer four years of two languages. Now Mr. Botana says that they were not planning on eliminating these programs? The plan continues to shift and change and without PPS stating clearly and honestly that they have rethought some of these issues, how can they expect public trust much less buy-in.

[Inappropriate comment?](#) [Alert us.](#)[Reply to this comment](#) | [Post a new comment](#)Posted by **cb**  
January 19, 2010, 10:12AM

Mr. Botana says, "It's not enough to say, "Just fix the broken schools." We've tried. But no school stands alone. " But then a few paragraphs later mentions Cleveland's success story, "Ten years ago, Cleveland High suffered from a less-than-stellar reputation. Cleveland instituted a rigorous college-prep program, ninth-grade academies and Mandarin immersion. Now it's a thriving, high-demand school."

To me this sounds like perhaps a disruptive and potentially divisive system redesign isn't necessary. Perhaps with PPS's help these schools that are still struggling can accomplish what Cleveland did.

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Posted by **Kelly Sugg McDonald**  
January 19, 2010, 10:41AM

CB,

"Perhaps with PPS's help these schools that are still struggling can accomplish what Cleveland did."

Sadly, this is impossible within the current economic climate. The only economically feasible way of providing the breadth and depth of coursework needed to attract students is to increase enrollment at the affected schools. The only way to get the students to these schools is to limit transfers out of these schools. Funding (and the attendant AP/IB coursework) follows students, remember.

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Posted by **Susan Zimmerman-Panter**  
January 19, 2010, 10:38AM

Students in the inequitable K-8s deserve more than the opportunity to take catch-up courses at the high school level. Show us the Redesign Team gets it, by including the K-8s in the Redesign process.

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Posted by **Kelly Sugg McDonald**  
January 19, 2010, 10:43AM

I see we are again in agreement, Susan.

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Posted by **katzpdx**  
January 19, 2010, 10:50AM

Kelly, CB and Susan all raise great points. PPS continues to bury their heads in the sand when it comes to the debacle they created in the name of K-8 configuration a few years ago.

Teachers, staff and parents are continually frustrated that PPS is still NOT addressing the crisis in K-8 while PPS is doing the PR blitz for rushing the HS Redesign, like this fantasy article.

The fact that PPS will not bring this into the conversation is disheartening. PPS needs to fix the K-8 problems before dealing with the high schools. They hardly bother to acknowledge (or worse, recognize) that there are severe problems and lack of equality in the lower and middle school grades.

PPS talks about about equality in the high schools as the end-goal, but they are simply not going to achieve that unless PPS immediately deals with lower and middle schools first and foremost, such as PPS Board Member Pam Knowles wrote about last spring:

<http://ppsequity.org/2009/04/13/knowles-on-k8s>

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Posted by **cb**  
January 19, 2010, 11:01AM

Amen Susan!

And yes, I agree with you Kelly. One of the lessons I imagine PPS has learned from the K-8 transition (that is as yet incomplete) is that it is a huge undertaking and very expensive to grow a program "up." The schools that added younger grades accomplished this more easily than did those schools that needed to grow, year by year, a 6th, 7th and 8th grade. Having these years added one by one did not allow for broad course offerings, for electives, for sufficient student numbers to support enriching opportunities.

Unless PPS mandates that all transfer students return to their neighborhood school -- even if they are sophomores, juniors, even seniors -- it will be impossible for a school to be able to support the full program that PPS is proposing. FTE follows the students.

The simple and hard truth is that even students who started at their neighborhood school and find themselves redistricted to a new school will need to move in order for the full and well-rounded program to be completely up and running on the first day. PPS needs to be absolutely clear on this point. It is critical to their plan. There can be no grandfathering. And yet I haven't heard PPS address this point openly and honestly.

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Posted by **cb**  
January 19, 2010, 11:10AM

And just to emphasize just how complicated and brutal this will be ...

we can redraw boundaries and limit transfers, but that will take us only so far. The numbers of students within a cachement will continue to wax and wane as neighborhoods age and renew. Are we up for a redraw every five to seven years?

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Posted by **swterry**  
January 19, 2010, 11:03AM

Does anyone know where Mr. Botana sends his own kids? I've read that several executives running the PPS system send their children to private schools. Nice vote of confidence in their own abilities. I say they need to put our money where their mouth is---if they don't believe in the system enough to put their own children through it, then they shouldn't be allowed to serve.

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Posted by **ktrujillo**  
January 19, 2010, 11:37AM

"It's not enough to say, "Just fix the broken schools." We've tried. " ...and **failed** at countless fixes, changes, reorgs which is why we have no faith in you or your redesign and refuse to be led down the primrose path. Parents and community members should fight this at every juncture.

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Posted by **SR**  
January 19, 2010, 12:05PM

Drop the focus school plan for now. It's sucks up resources and creams students. Your focus should be on preparing kids for high school by repairing the K-8s.

After that we (the public) will need to know which schools will close and what boundaries will change before we buy in to the plan so we know clearly what is at stake. It's easy to come up with hypothetical situations but applying them to the real world is the only way to be honest with the public.

What evidence do they have that this plan has been successful elsewhere?

What about this 8th grade group who was seriously impacted by the K-8 model and then ignored? Why are they being experimented on again?

What about the West side? Why use Wilson as your example when you know it won't be touched? A disingenuous example.

How much is the transition going to cost?

And many, many more specifics that need to be addressed.

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Posted by **Kelly Sugg McDonald**

January 19, 2010, 12:18PM

My daughters both went to Roseway Heights until we moved to the Twin Cities area in September '09. I believe it was much easier to merge an elementary into a middle school, than to grow from an elementary. We were considerably luckier than other schools who didn't have labs and middle school materials at their disposal. We also got to keep some excellent middle school teachers. If a job transfer hadn't required us to move, we would still be happily ensconced in the wonderful community at RHS.

That said, my elder daughter now attends a standard middle school, and I'm grateful that she's able to take AP coursework in both language arts and math. She's taking speech, and was given a choice between band, choir, and orchestra.

I was always skeptical about reverting to K-8s, and I am even more so now. Personally, I would have sent my daughter to Gregory Heights. It had excellent teachers and a unique multi-cultural environment. It would have looked better on paper too (tests), if the top had not been creamed off by PPS's ridiculous transfer policy. Although I do believe that the middle school inequity needs to be addressed immediately, so too do I believe the same is true for high schools. This is why I'm advocating for tabling the 'magnet' high school option.

It's true that there are no easy answers to addressing high school inequities. It would be challenging and painful to send kids back to their community high school. Not only have I witnessed my kids having to change schools, I went to 3 different high schools in Oregon and Washington. As with any life change, it's challenging; however, it also leads to many unexpected rewards. My daughters, for example, have never seemed as self-assured and confident as they have since their recent move. Personally, I went from a disadvantaged high school, to a rigorous one, and went from bored to engaged. It was life-altering, and I'd love to see my experience repeated at schools like Jefferson and Madison.

Unfortunately, I agree that 'growing' these community schools is not a very good option; however, anything that's done to right this boat is going to take time. Although I agree that the K-8 process was mangled, I believe that both the board and PPS have learned considerably from their mistakes. And more than that, I trust Carole Smith -- which is more than I can say about her predecessor.

In my humble opinion, however, what's more painful is to not do anything about the inequities the high schools are currently experiencing. To know that my kids are happy and challenged isn't good enough for me. I want to know that the kids in the community right next door to my own have the same advantages at their school. In my case, I still care about about a school system that my children do not even attend. I care because as a Portland native, I believe strongly that my home city can do better than make excuses for doing nothing for it's less advantaged students. I believe that the city I will always call home should 'get on the bus' and fight for equity for ALL of it's public school students.

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Posted by **ktrujillo**  
January 19, 2010, 1:11PM

Jeje...be careful getting down off that high horse.

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Posted by **Kelly Sugg McDonald**  
January 19, 2010, 1:45PM

I'd love to hear your proposals, Ms. Trujillo. So far, I can only find retorts, barbs, and criticisms amongst your many posts. You are undoubtedly funny, but perhaps adding a bit of 'constructive' to your criticism...

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Posted by **ktrujillo**  
January 19, 2010, 6:11PM

I sincerely wish I knew the answer. Of course, I wish even more that they knew the answer but have zero confidence that they do. You can want change but still believe that the agents of that change are misguided, deluded or just plain dishonest. If (in the case of PPS) they have a track record of all of those things than it's doubly so.

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Posted by **Kelly Sugg McDonald**  
January 19, 2010, 1:48PM

I'd love to hear your proposals, Ms. Trujillo. So far, I can only find retorts, barbs, and criticisms amongst your many posts. You are undoubtedly funny, but perhaps adding a bit of 'constructive' to your criticism...

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Posted by **teechr34**  
January 19, 2010, 8:01PM

"TRUST CAROLE SMITH???" Surely you jest! Please, give me some of what you are taking, I want to find a way to trust her...because I haven't been given a reason to, yet.....

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