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Portland schools: Advanced high school science will remain unequal from school to school

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By **Betsy Hammond, The Oregonian**
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Michael Lloyd / The Oregonian

The Portland school board is leaning toward spending \$1.3 million to buy new science textbooks and materials for all sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders and to train teachers to use them.

But it's a different story when it comes to high school science. **As The Oregonian reported in February, a lack of money is the sole reason disparities in high school science won't be addressed** this fall.

The district admits there are glaring differences between the textbooks and the course content of physics, chemistry and advanced biology at different high schools. But Superintendent Carole Smith has decided that, given flat funding from the state for schools next year, the district can't afford to buy new textbooks and teacher training to fix those disparities.

After seeking extensive input from principals and others who monitor what's working best in Portland schools, Smith decided that full-day kindergarten, **intensive reading instruction for students who are behind** and **a new educational early warning system to monitor**

and address student learning and behavior problems are higher priorities than new high school textbooks.

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Curriculum director Marcia Arganbright wrote to principals today:

"There are no new high school textbook purchases in the proposed budget for 2011-12. We are not able to move forward with plans for advanced science (chemistry, physics, and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate sciences), health, PE, upper-level Spanish or any other world language. These adoptions are all board-approved, but unfortunately, the budget proposals for purchasing these materials did not rise to a level of priority to be included in the superintendent's proposed budget."

The fact that more equitable high school science texts are being delayed this year can be seen as ironic, given that the district spent years gearing up for **high school changes taking place this fall that were sold as a way to make high school offerings more uniform and fair.**

Marshall High is closing, Jefferson and Benson highs are reshaped into small niche high schools and more students are required to attend their neighborhood high school. The school board took those steps in order to make the seven remaining neighborhood high schools more alike in size so that students in all parts of town would have access to the same quality and breadth of course offerings.

Given budgetary, logistical and staffing challenges, district officials have backpedaled on their earlier pledges of seven equivalent high schools and emphasized they are making the freshman experience more equal at all neighborhood schools this year.

Advanced science classes --- along with career classes, college-credit classes, world languages and catch-up support classes -- will be made more uniform from high school to high school as next year's freshmen advance through high school, **they now say.**

- Betsy Hammond

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