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On a collision course at Portland's Grant High

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By Susan Nielsen, The Oregonian [Follow](#)

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Grant High School in Portland Public Schools.

There is no villain at Grant High School in Northeast Portland, no person to blame for the unhappiness over student schedules, and no simple lever to pull and fix the problem.

There is only a vague sense that Grant symbolizes the dilemma at the heart of Portland Public Schools: How do you serve the "haves" and the "have-nots" simultaneously, on a tight budget, without messing up things for all kids?

The district hasn't figured this out yet. I don't think the community has come to terms with the challenge,

either.

Grant High enjoys a good reputation as a strong school with great parent support, excellent extracurriculars and an enviable array of Advanced Placement classes. Less known is the chasm at Grant between students who excel and those who flounder and drop out -- a chasm that exists districtwide.

"Sadly, this tends to break down by socioeconomic and racial lines," says Principal Vivian Orlen. "It's a national embarrassment."

Orlen wants to beef up support for struggling students. At the same time, she faces more budget cuts, plus multiple other factors beyond her control: class sizes that are already on the high side, an indirect cap on school enrollment, a teacher contract that governs workload, plus a funding formula that favors higher-poverty schools.

Put all this together, and Orlen has proposed limiting the number of AP classes that seniors can take -- as well as their total class load.

Needless to say, some parents are freaking out.

One mom says parents feel blindsided by the class restrictions. Another mom, Kaarin Smith, says her family has transferred her younger teenager to a private school for next year. Parent Kristen Jones, who has watched Grant for years through her kids, says she strongly supports the principal and staff but worries about the school's direction.

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Her kids have long faced large class sizes and stretched-thin teachers, Jones says, but "I have never seen anything as bad as it is now."

Last week, **Portland district leaders told high schools to switch to an eight-period block schedule and to limit most students to seven classes.** Parents are unhappy about the prospect of less instructional time. Grant's limits may be more severe: Seniors may be restricted from taking more than three AP classes -- and perhaps no more than six total classes, unless they need the credits to graduate. One of those classes would likely be a glorified study hall.

Orlen cautions that the schedule remains in flux and the district's budget isn't final. She also sympathizes with parents' frustrations, even as she grows impatient with the armchair quarterbacking.

"I've come to appreciate what parents have had to deal with," she says. "They feel that every year, something has been taken from them."

But she asks some provocative questions: What *should* four years of high school look like? How many classes *should* Oregon provide once students have fulfilled their graduation requirements? Why is a class considered worthy only if there is an "AP" or "IB" label attached to it? What is the fairest way to spread finite resources?

Anyone?

Bueller?

The situation brewing at Grant isn't new to Portland. Students at Portland's lower-income high schools have dealt for years with limited access to AP classes and various limits on their choices. They simply lack Grant's megaphone.

Also, Grant will still be a good school with excellent opportunities for kids, even if it must trim its course menu. In some ways, Grant might be better. So I don't share the apocalyptic views of the most-upset parents.

However, these parents bring up a troubling issue: Portland may be inching toward part-time high school to help balance the budget. That translates to less classroom time for everyone -- including kids in the middle who are neither star students nor singled out for special help. Taken too far, the limits on classes will lead to students who are less competitive in college applications and less prepared for college itself.

"Portland Public Schools is full of wonderful teachers and counselors, and they've been able to do great things," says **Eric Delehoy**, a college-admissions consultant who advises Portland-area families. He says his "jaw dropped" over the proposed limits at Grant.

"My worry is that PPS is going to get a reputation for being less rigorous than other districts," he adds. "I hope they find a solution that is fiscally responsible that doesn't hurt the students."

What that solution looks like is a matter of opinion.

Or in Grant's case, a thousand opinions.

-- Associate editor **Susan Nielsen**, The Oregonian

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
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ednumrich May 05, 2011 at 5:41AM

So, what's new?

As a 1958 graduate of Grant ("that's 53 years ago for you folks from Rio Linda"), the school was notorious for its economic, social (and yes, racial) schizophrenia.

On the other hand:

Very few kids "fell through the cracks", at least in part because there were no "designer curricula": everyone got an equal shot at any course they wanted to take. This is especially telling in a school with 2,600 students and more than 600 seniors. You could count the drop-outs on two hands at the most.

We had fantastic arts and drama programs, orchestra, marching band, championship sports teams, and a real cafeteria. Kids came from west of the now-MLK Blvd. to 82nd, Lombard to Laurelhurst. There were few fat ones because there were no school busses: you walked - or used public transit, hitched a ride, or drove a car if you had one.

The top federal personal income tax rate was over 90%, unemployment was almost non-existent, a lot of people bought a new car every other year, and Ronald Reagan was a "B"-movie actor.

And we paid our bills.

"Go figure . . . "

OregonPatriot May 05, 2011 at 9:55PM

Easy to figure. Liberals/progressives. The families are much different than when I lived in the neighborhood in the 1950's, 60's, 70's and 80's. Two years ago PPS spent more per Grant student that at any time before in the history of the school after spending rose year after year without pause. Portland has the most liberal voters in the state and they are more progressive than those of most of the 49 other states. The patriots that made Grant a great school voted with their feet -- they left. I left the neighborhood for good 25 years ago. Then, seven years ago I moved out of Multnomah county vowing to never return. Now we all see what the liberals (a.k.a. Obama supporters) have done.

ednumrich May 06, 2011 at 4:45PM

You certainly entitled to your opinion.

It has nothing to do with my comments and misses the point altogether . . .

dooglas May 07, 2011 at 10:27AM

The "patriots" that made Grant a great school left???? I lived in the Grant District for many years and both my children went to school there. I don't recall that area ever being made up of a bunch of Tea Party flag-wavers. Just good solid American families trying to do the best for their kids. And that is still who lives there (even though you don't).

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nutmeg31

May 05, 2011 at 6:26AM

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Why the continued paradigm of 4 years of High School? with the easy/soft curricula requirements in Oregon public education even the moderately intelligent and motivated teen could easily graduate in 3 years. take away the fluff course and the overblown study halls masquerading as 'Senior Projects' and there is plenty of time to devote to core classes and cut at minimum a full semester, if not two.

Of course that also means kids graduating sooner and moving out of the system; less public funding via headcount in seats. The educational establishment fights that tooth and nail.

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salanie

May 05, 2011 at 7:50AM

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I love this! Faced with underperforming students Principal Orlen decides to LOWER the bar.

Yeah. Great long term thinking. Let's turn out a whole bunch of mediocre students.

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salanie

May 05, 2011 at 7:53AM

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Yeah. Great long term thinking. Let's turn out a whole bunch of mediocre students.

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mmrhanna

May 05, 2011 at 8:25AM

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"Needless to say, some parents are freaking out." Try this one..."Needless to say, some students are freaking out." Go to Grant and talk to these kids who are taking AP classes. You will find bright, engaged kids who are pushing themselves, who are very upset about this situation, who are creating petitions, who want to go to school to learn and be intellectually engaged. Principal Orlen seems to think it's the parents who are driving this train. Have systems to figure out who really shouldn't be taking these upper-level classes and offer them interesting classes that don't have the AP designation. Let the kids who want/need them take them. With AP test week upon us right now, I personally think 3 AP classes in a year is enough.

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mmrhanna

May 05, 2011 at 8:27AM

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 **jadequeen** May 05, 2011 at 9:18AM
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The strongest students challenge themselves and challenge each other. The projects and writing they do provide evidence of their work for college and employment. This is less so for students who are struggling.

One of my sons did well at Grant. He was motivated by science and math. He had excellent instruction, and now he is finishing up a Ph.D. at MIT. For my other son, Grant was a disaster. The public schools have unparalleled facilities. In my experience, they are very good with bright, motivated students who know what they want to do. These kids take advantage of the libraries, the teachers, and all the other advantages public schools have.

The principal is right. Dedicating extra resources to students who are going to do well without them is to contribute to our problems rather than to move toward solving them. Often, bright kids want to solve problems. How to do more with less and how to help fellow students seems a worthy project to me.

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 **tired parent** May 05, 2011 at 9:32AM
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Grant High is a strong competitive school, which is being weakened by a principal with the view that if some are lagging behind, we should slow the academic train. Grant has been in the national spotlight this week for their Constitution Team, has good sports teams, talented music and drama programs. Some students are prepared academically, and some are not. Some students attend every class, and some skip. Some do their assignments and the extra reading, and some do not ever bring a book home.

Are these issues of 'have and have not'? No. Does the principal like to blame it on that? Oh, yes. She had previously been in the Oregonian, talking in very divisive terms about the student population, and parents were not pleased. When she first announced the meeting about proposed scheduling changes, parents responded with emails, calls and appointments. At the meeting, she was argumentative, stating that she was reconsidering her choices, but saying to the parents who attended it was "not because of you".

Lowering the bar for achievement lowers opportunity for every student. Cutting off the top students does not make the school more uniform, it makes it mediocre. I think she is ill equipped to deal with this number of students and is in a position way over her head. So, blame the students and parents, create an issue and cry 'poor me', it's "a national embarrassment".

I think she is the problem, and her solutions are not responsive to the students she is supposed to be leading. Where is Toni Hunter [previous principal] when we need her? Who hired this person without any advanced degree and significant experience to run a school this size?

All I know is that I am no longer a proud parent, and have been ashamed by all the bad press she generates since she came to Grant.

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 **globalgramma** May 05, 2011 at 9:43AM
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Hello!!! Oregon has been slashing school budgets for 40 years. And the quality of our schools has been in a nose dive the entire time. This should be no surprise to anyone. It is simple cause and effect.

The question is, when are the people and legislators of Oregon going to grasp that Oregon's future, its economy depend on the quality of education we give our children, and get serious about ponying up?

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 **tombdragon** May 05, 2011 at 9:49AM
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I graduated from Benson Polytechnic in 1980, and we had to meet certain expectation just to attend, for many just the threat of being force to attend schools like Adams, & Washington High was enough to keep us motivated to do our best.

We had students from EVERY socio-economic environment imaginable, and I know some

accommodations were made privately between students and teachers, the high expectation, and standards weren't relaxed just because you had no money. We were at Benson to learn to be engineers, and we achieved that goal. Every graduate from Benson, I know, is and engineer. Now most of us have degrees in other subjects, but we all have the capability to engineer - design, manufacture - and build, a variety of things.

Schools have thrown away anything that affirms their sense of "community" or things shared in common by residents. Everyone who is a member of a church, religion, school, fraternal organization, or even a city share something. In High School it is learning, common events like sports, and being a regional gathering place for regions of the City/Community. A grade school is a place to share common, local, neighborhood concerns, and educate the neighborhood children in an environment that is familiar, and not far from home.

Portland is the best example I know of how to destroy community, and ignore common social elements we share as residents. First we reorder neighborhoods by age, and send students to regional middle schools, but ignore the individuals in neighborhoods need to gather as a community. Then the City of Portland institutes Neighborhood Associations to communicate City goals to residents, rather than foster a relationship that assists neighborhoods in making individual residents lives better. Than the City of Portland re-orders neighborhoods based upon income, by instituting Transit Oriented Development, and Urban Renewal, to control political outcomes within the neighborhood.

Now we hear that Portland has narrowed its appeal so much that only upper middle income White's - without children, who don't go to church, and have no interest in community, find that the City of Portland offers them the community they want to live in, and that most others have left, are planning to leave, or would leave if they could afford too.

Yep, schools don't work, and it is the "Progressive" nature of our politics that is focused upon the destruction of the individual, and seeks to impede their ability to earn, learn, and function independent of government.

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whatgoeson May 05, 2011 at 8:05PM

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Well, if people could learn, earn, and so forth, independent of government then...you wouldn't really need as many bureaucrats, would you? I think the education system in general has about become its' own worst enemy, too many social engineers, not enough instructors. Ultimately, school is about prepping kids for the adult world, the working world, and college, the business world, the world in which they will be living, the world in which they'll have to make a living, that kind of thing. Does the curriculum honestly match that description/mission?

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salz7 May 05, 2011 at 10:10AM

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It's called homogenization make everyone the same and Portland has taken this path the past several years. Look at the move to K-8's and all the fanfare that the school board and then superintendent Vicki Phillips created to push that program. You now find numerous barely functioning K-8's that offer good elementary programs, but suffer greatly at the 6-8 format. These kids in K-8's do not get many rigorous offerings and then move on to the high schools like Grant, unprepared to deal with a high school curriculum that is tougher than what they had before, and shock of shocks, you actually have to do the work and get credits to graduate. Just check out the offerings of Jackson Middle School and say Rigler or Harvey Scott K-8's, you might be surprised. On top of all that the district under Carole Smith decided not to close more than one high school and did little to shore up and consolidate more local neighborhood schools. There are consequences for decisions made by this board and those before it that are now coming to fruition; add to that a mentality that kids who excel can go on their own, we need to focus on those who can't. Try building up the foundations at the lower grades and then schools like Grant might not be dealing with decisions that are placing anchors on the backs of the top end kids while throwing life preservers to the kids who have fallen through the cracks of the K-8 system. The bar does get lower and the consequences are now floating to the top.

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