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High-School Redesign: An Unofficial, Chronological History

3:34 PM February 25th, 2010 by Beth Slovic

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The idea that the **Portland School Board** is just now getting the opportunity to weigh in on Superintendent Carole Smith's **high-school redesign** proposal is understandable. The board won't vote on anything until March 8.

But that idea also ignores a lot of history. In fact, the redesign has been in the works for almost three years. Board members have had numerous chances to contribute before now.

What follows, then, is the unofficial history of Portland Public Schools' high-school redesign. The process begins around 2007, when the School Board hired Smith to replace former Superintendent [Vicki Phillips](#). If I'm missing any pivotal moments, please chime in. I'll add them to the chronology.

Here goes. And fair warning: I won't blame you if choose not to read everything. The process has been exhausting. But please know, I'm trying to spare you this [mind-numbing visual](#) [PDF] from the district.

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Pre-2007:

The district's efforts to reform high schools are scattershot. PPS splits lower-performing high schools — Jefferson, Roosevelt, Madison and Marshall — into "small schools," with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

A June 2006 [audit](#) from Multnomah County shows PPS's liberal transfer policy of letting kids attend different neighborhood schools has sharpened racial and economic segregation.

May 2007:

The School Board authorizes spending \$770,000 for a contract with Texas-based Magellan Group to assess the condition of Portland's 90-plus schools. The idea then was to embark on a massive project of rebuilding or renovating most or all of Portland's aging buildings.

Summer 2007:

Magellan employees review the school district's buildings.

October 2007:

The board [hires](#) Phillips' former chief of staff, Carole Smith, to be the new superintendent. Reforming high schools is one of Smith's top priorities. She promises to make Jefferson great.

November 2007:

The district held community meetings at the Oregon Convention Center to promote rebuilding. "Equal parts evangelism and an energizing of the district's voter base," *WW* wrote, "the meetings were a cross between Mayor Tom Potter's visionPDX and Sunday services at the Foursquare Church."

December 2007:

Magellan [consultants shared findings with PPS](#), revealing district schools needed between \$900 million and \$1.4 billion in repairs.

Winter 2008:

Smith forms an "action team" to look systemically at high schools.

January 2008:

The School Board holds one of its regular meetings at Jeff the same week then-Mayor Tom Potter moved City Hall to the high school. Parents, including Amanda Fritz in her pre-City Council days, present a resolution to the board highlighting [increased segregation](#) by race and class at PPS schools as a result of the district's transfer policy.

The district held more public meetings about the conditions of PPS's buildings with Magellan, whose contract grew to \$920,000. At the same time, the district announced it was putting off talks about its high schools, which were seen as in need of programmatic reform — not just facilities updates.

March 3, 2008:

The board [held a work session](#) to discuss all of its facilities except high schools. One of the consultants with Magellan is critical of Smith and two

members of her senior staff. “I had the opportunity to meet with the two leaders of this [action team] group,” Bill DeJong wrote in an email on March 4, 2008. “I was underwhelmed. Based on what I saw, ‘they would have a hard time making their way out of a wet paper bag.’”

Later, his contract isn’t extended.

March 12, 2008:

Smith sends an email to her entire PPS staff. “From pre-K to 8th grade, we are ready to engage the community in planning for facilities – how best to create and revive school buildings to serve our students’ needs,” she writes. “We just aren’t ready to plunge into a bricks-and-mortar discussion of our high schools.”

Sept. 5, 2008:

Smith addresses City Club of Portland and suggests she will not close any high school campus. “I’m not ready to give up on those schools and on those neighborhoods,” she said. Later, she added: “I have seen no evidence that we will be able to effectively improve student achievement or graduation rates by shutting a building.”

November 2008:

PPS had at one point considered the possibility of asking voters to approve a construction bond in November 2008. This date comes and goes with no news from PPS about when the district might ignite this campaign.

January 2009:

Superintendent convenes her Advisory Committee on Enrollment and Transfer to study the district’s liberal transfer policy.

February 2009:

Madison High [abandons “small schools.”](#)

March 2009:

The school board weighs [five possible conceptual models](#) for high schools including one that called for large campuses with themes; a second one that incorporated neighborhood schools and “focus option” schools; a third called “regional flex” where different types of schools are offered in every quadrant; a fourth with no attendance boundaries and a fifth that was based primarily on magnet schools.

PPS also conducts focus groups with students.

April 2009:

The five models for high school reform were narrowed to three.

April and May 2009:

The district holds three community meetings about those models, which the district calls “Big Ideas.”

June 24, 2009:

On the steps of Benson, Smith endorsed a preliminary plan for high schools

that called for six to seven neighborhood high schools, three to six “focus” schools and changes to the district’s transfer policy. “Portland residential patterns alone do not alone explain the inequity in our system,” she said.

June 29, 2009:

At a School Board meeting, David Wynde asks a host of questions about the state of the high-school redesign. Few of the questions could be answered.

Sept 14, 2009:

Wynde [reminds PPS staff](#) of his questions from June. “Every question that I had at that point is still a question,” he said. “That’s the octopus we’re struggling with at the moment.”

Oct. 9 and Oct. 17, 2009:

The district holds two more community meetings — at Marshall High and Rosa Parks Elementary — about high-school redesign.

Oct. 21, 2009:

WW publishes [the stories of two eighth-grade girls](#) to show the inadequacies of the district’s K-8 reforms.

November – December 2009:

The district holds community meetings at all neighborhood high-school campuses to discuss the high-school redesign. The [turnout at Franklin High](#) tops 2,000.

WW reports that when parents ask good questions — about funding, boundaries, class sizes and feeder patterns, the answer more often than not is: “That is not the topic of discussion tonight.”

Jan. 25, 2010:

Smith’s chief of staff tells the board they’ll hear a set of resolutions about the high-school redesign on Feb. 8 that will include details about the size and number of neighborhood high schools.

Chief Academic Officer Xavier Botana says the proposed ban on neighborhood-to-neighborhood transfers [may not apply to immersion students](#).

Feb. 8, 2010:

School board members do not hear these details about the high-school redesign. Instead, they get a resolution about [the values](#) of the high school redesign.

Feb. 22: 2010:

School board members go section-by-section through Smith’s resolution, [mostly missing the big picture](#).

Tonight, Feb. 25, 2010:

Yet another community meeting, this time at Vestal K-8 School, 161 N.E. 82nd Ave., at 7 pm.

March 8, 2010:

The board is scheduled to vote on Smith's resolution affirming the values of the redesign. **WU**

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February 25, 2010 at 4:42 pm