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State of the Schools 2016

Marnie Morrione, Portland Board of Public Education Chair

Oct. 17, 2016

Good afternoon, Mayor Strimling, city councilors, educators, and members of the public. As chair of the Portland Board of Public Education, I am pleased to present to you the annual State of the Schools as required by Portland's Charter.

Before I begin, I'd like to recognize my colleagues from the board who are here with us today.

I'd also like to recognize our new superintendent, Xavier Botana, along with the other hardworking members of the Portland Public Schools' team.

To begin, I first want to recount for you a moment that I recently had with a new parent to Portland Public Schools and our city. The mother was sitting in Portland Public Schools' Central Office with three children—one in her lap, the other standing by her side and another fidgeting in his chair and swinging his legs in anticipation. I smiled at the mother and her children. Before darting to my meeting, I paused to ask, "How are you today?" The oldest one said enthusiastically, "We are getting ready." I paused and replied, "What are you getting ready for?" and after glancing at his mother, he said excitedly and with hope in his eyes, "I am getting ready to go to school."

We spoke for a few more minutes and I wished them well.

Since that conversation, the little boy's enthusiasm has stuck with me. This is one of the many reasons why I serve on the Board and have served for the past eight years along with my dedicated colleagues. Seeing the hope and excitement in this young boy, I can honestly say it captures the importance of our work—each of us. We are working together to meet not only the needs of students, but also to make a positive lasting difference for each child, every family, and our entire community—our society. This is work we cannot afford to take lightly and we each play an integral part.

Today I will be highlighting for you our school district's accomplishments of the past year, and what we need to do to ensure that we move forward and are able to continue to offer a high quality education to all of Portland's students. The students of our city are the future.

At your seats, you will find handouts with current district facts and data.

Portland Public Schools is Maine’s largest and most diverse school district. We serve close to 6,800 students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12.

More than half our students – 55 percent, as of Oct. 1 – qualify for free or reduced school lunch.

Currently, nearly 2,300 students, 33 percent of our enrollment, come from homes where other than English languages are spoken—a total of 60 languages district-wide.

According to our latest data, 113 of our students are enrolled in pre-kindergarten, an increase of nearly 35 percent since our program started in 2011. Research shows that students who experience quality pre-K perform better academically and go on to attend college at a greater rate, so this is truly an investment in our students’ future.

Also, through Portland Adult Education, we served more than 4,000 adults last year, in academic and ELL classes, as well as enrichment and job skills classes. Last fall, Portland Adult Education won an Education at Work for Maine Award from the Finance Authority of Maine for its work fostering “self-sufficiency through education” for adults in our community, including immigrants and refugees. Our adult education program is a valuable resource for parents of our students and other community members trying to better their lives and the lives of their children.

It is important to understand that Portland Public Schools’ programs are having a direct impact on the lives of approximately 1 in 6 Portlanders.

Our district employs more than 1,200 talented and dedicated staff. We appreciate all of their hard work and dedication each day.

One of our newest employees is Superintendent Xavier Botana.

The school board hired Mr. Botana earlier this year after conducting a nationwide search for the best person to lead the Portland Public Schools.

We had more than 40 applicants and after an extensive interview process that included community meetings and visits to his district, we chose Mr. Botana based on his experience, credentials, and the transformative work he accomplished in a district similar to our own.

He’s been with us since July 1, and we’re already very pleased with his leadership.

In the public forums we held during our superintendent search, the community said how much they value the diversity of our school system.

Mr. Botana adds to that diversity. He immigrated to the United States from Cuba as a child. Growing up bilingual in Spanish, he began his educational career as an English as Second Language teacher and worked his way up to leadership roles centered on instructional strategy, curriculum alignment, and professional development.

During the superintendent search, our community also stressed that they would like to see continuity in the



leadership of our district. Mr. Botana is committed to making Maine his home. He plans to create a pipeline of experienced leaders who can quickly assume key roles when vacancies occur. Continuity is very important to the school board as well, where almost half of its members have served six or more years.

In your handouts, you will find a mid-October snapshot of our data from our district assessment, the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) test. The NWEA is a national assessment that provides a measurement of each student's academic growth.

Please note that we have not yet received our 2015-2016 state test data, so our complete annual District Scorecard will not be ready for a few more months.

The snapshot shows we have strong accomplishments and points us to areas where we need to invest strategically to improve student outcomes.

Our reading progress has been steady over the past four years in grades 3, 5 and 8. These improvements are powered by significant gains for our African American/Black and Economically Disadvantaged students and by some important gains by our English Language Learner (ELL) students in the lower grades.

In mathematics, we have made significant strides over the past four years in grades 3 and 8 although but our fifth-grade performance is largely unchanged. In the third and eighth grades, again, we have seen impressive gains by our African American/Black and Economically Disadvantaged students and ELL students.

Looking at our high school students this past year, 32 percent of our 11th and 12th grade students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. Also, 58 percent of those students scored a 3 or better on their AP exams.

In addition, 17 percent of our 11th graders participated in dual enrollment college coursework in 2015-2016, compared to 5 percent in school year 2014-15. Dual enrollment is a great opportunity for our students to obtain college credits at a significant savings for students and families.

The Portland Public Schools is now engaged in the exciting work of preparing our current eighth graders to receive "Proficiency-Based Diplomas" when they graduate from high school in 2021. Our graduation rate for the 2015 cohort – the latest data available at this point – is 84 percent. That's a substantial increase over the 79 percent rate of the past few years.

The latest amendment to the state's "Proficiency-Based Diploma" law requires that graduating seniors meet proficiency standards in language arts, math, science, and social studies by 2021.

Portland's new Proficiency-Based Graduation Policy includes provisions outlining educational experiences available to students as they work toward proficiency in eight content areas and Maine's Guiding Principles. These experiences include early college/dual enrollment courses, career and technical education, online/virtual learning, apprenticeships, internships, fieldwork, community service, and independent study.

Portland is an amazing city with a strong commitment to improving outcomes for students and a clear understanding that we are better when we work together to achieve this. We are aided in our efforts to improve graduation rates and student achievement by a variety of partners. I will highlight a few of the many organizations that are working with the Portland Public Schools to achieve those results.



Our partnerships with Jobs for Maine's Graduates (JMG), the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and Great Schools Partnership have helped boost the success of the implementation of broader base learning opportunities for students this past year.

Portland ConnectEd, a cross-sector partnership, works with our district to improve educational and economic outcomes for Portland children, families, and students.

Our flourishing partnership with the University of Southern Maine not only provides dual enrollment opportunities, but also includes the Summer Bridge Program, which helps ensure the success of our high school graduates enrolling at USM each fall. This program offers students summertime opportunities to experience and explore college life and become familiar with USM's campuses and services.

Southern Maine Community College's MySuccess program also benefits our high school graduates. It provides them with an intensive three-week summer success program, scholarship incentives and a dedicated success coach who will work with them year-round to ensure their success at SMCC.

The Portland Education Foundation (PEF) is an independent nonprofit that is aligned with Portland Public Schools through school board policy and a Memorandum of Understanding.

PEF's mission is to raise philanthropic support to enhance educational opportunities for present and future students in Portland's public schools.

PEF also provides grants to our teachers to encourage academic innovation, creativity, and excellence. Teacher-grant funding for this year and last is expected to total close to \$75,000.

Finally, our students benefit from Culture Club-Portland, a collaboration between the Portland Education Foundation, the Portland Public Schools, the Portland Museum of Art, Portland Stage, Portland Ovations, and the Portland Symphony Orchestra.

The goal of the program is to enable each of our students to attend programs at each of four participating arts institutions every year. This summer, we learned that an anonymous donor pledged full funding for this year, and partial of the next two years. Total investment in support of Culture Club-Portland since it began four years ago has been over one million dollars.

To improve student achievement and meet students' needs, the Portland Public Schools offers unique learning experiences. All of our schools have exciting programs and opportunities, but I will highlight a few for you today that have grown this past year.

Due to growing demand, students now have access to experiential learning opportunities from elementary school through high school with Casco Bay High School, King Middle School and Presumpscot Elementary School. Each of these schools is part of the EL Education network, formerly called the Expeditionary Learning network.

Casco Bay's principal, Derek Pierce, was selected this spring by the Maine Principals' Association as Maine's Principal of the Year for 2016 for his ability "to inspire all those around him to meet the learning needs of every student, every day."



Portland Public Schools also stands out for ways it prepares students to be successful in our increasingly interconnected world.

Ocean Avenue Elementary School was recently named as an authorized International Baccalaureate (IB) World School, Primary Years Programme. The International Baccalaureate Organization is a nonprofit education organization that supports learning models for students focused on rigorous intellectual inquiry, personal growth and helping students become “internationally-minded.” Ocean Avenue is the first and only elementary school in Maine to earn this distinction. It is also one of just a handful of schools in northern New England to attain this goal.

Learning other languages is an increasingly vital necessity in our globalized world. Portland schools also stand out when it comes to our world language programs, which we work to grow each year. All our students begin our foreign language program in third grade.

Three years ago we started a Spanish immersion program at Lyseth Elementary School, in which students do all their learning in Spanish. The program, the first of its kind in Maine, was recently featured on Maine public television. The program now runs from kindergarten through second grade and we plan to continue its growth through the elementary grades.

Another example this past year, through our partnership with the University of Southern Maine’s Confucius Institute, the Portland Public Schools was named a Confucius Classroom. As a result, the district expanded its Mandarin Chinese classes at Deering and Casco Bay high schools.

Also, Deering High School, the only International Studies Schools Network high school in New England, has been offering an Arabic language program since 2013. In addition, with a partnership with the Council for International Educational Exchange (CIEE) headquartered in Portland, four students received full scholarships for study abroad in Spain, the Dominican Republic, and Japan. Approximately 20 students traveled abroad last summer to study languages and learn more about other cultures.

In addition, Portland Public Schools grew its education regarding various career options.

Portland High School stands out for its Pathways program, which affords students the opportunity for job shadows and internships to prepare them to make choices about their own future. A growing network of community partners, developed and coordinated by the Jobs for Maine’s Graduates provides students with expanded learning opportunities to explore career pathways.

Last year, 200 freshmen practiced interviews and reviewed resumes with local business professionals. Almost the same number of sophomores job shadowed at local businesses and community organizations. More than 25 juniors and seniors held internships.

Also, at our Portland Arts and Technology High School (PATHS), approximately 200 students from Portland and surrounding communities each year earn certificates of completion – and in some cases, national certifications – in areas such as automotive technology, carpentry, plumbing, heating, commercial art, culinary concepts, early childhood, fashion marketing, health science occupations, manufacturing technology, marine systems, and new media.



These are just a few of the examples that add to the quality of education and growing opportunities for our students.

Portland Public Schools works to provide a safe and inclusive school learning environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth and employees. The district is very proud to have won EqualityMaine's Partner for Equality Award last spring.

The Portland Public Schools also recognizes that we can't educate our children alone – family engagement is essential.

That is why, this past year, we focused on strengthening our relationship with families.

We did our annual Parent Survey and, as you can see in your handout, the results from the 2015-2016 school year are very positive.

In February, the school board established a Public Affairs Committee to give additional opportunity for engagement between the community and the board.

To date, the committee has held three well-attended community forums and received valuable feedback. We will continue to hold these forums each quarter and encourage all to attend.

The district also has been working with Portland Empowered over the past two years. As a result of that work, the school board in August created a Parent Partnership Policy Ad Hoc Committee. This new committee is charged with reviewing and revising our district's current Parent Involvement Policy and recommending a new Parent Partnership Policy to the board by Nov. 30 of this year.

Thanks to the City Council and Portland voters, our \$103.6 million FY2017 school budget was approved in May.

The budget we crafted puts students first, values our employees, and respects taxpayers. That was not an easy task because this school budget contained about \$1.4 million less in state education aid than our district received the previous school year.

We are most grateful to Portland taxpayers' continued support of our budget. They should know that the district has been a good steward of its resources over the past year, which has resulted in a modest fund balance.

Now, in anticipation of next year's budget, the school board has voted unanimously to endorse "Stand Up for Students," a citizens' initiative on the state ballot this November that would generate an estimated \$157 million more in state education funding.

Maine's current education funding forces local communities, like ours, to shoulder most of the costs of maintaining Maine's schools, often through increases in local property taxes and cuts to programs and services. In recent years, more than \$12 million in state funding has been curtailed or offset to Portland Public Schools.



Out of our \$103.6 million budget, the state contributed only \$15.2 million, less than 15 percent of the overall budget. If Question 2 passes on Nov. 8, Portland stands to receive approximately \$11 million in additional state aid that is desperately needed.

Looking towards the upcoming year and beyond, we are currently in the process of updating our Comprehensive Plan, a roadmap to align our district's work with our mission and vision. The process includes school leaders and staff, as well as the community.

The district's vision and mission, included in your handout, will remain unchanged in the new Comprehensive Plan.

We will be updating the goals and how we measure and report our progress. The plan will also serve as the basis for Superintendent Botana's accountability to the board.

We will have a final plan in place by the end of this year.

In addition, we are thankful to Portland voters for approving a referendum this April authorizing the construction of a new Hall Elementary School on the existing school site. The total cost of the project will be \$29.7 million, but local taxpayers will only be responsible for \$1.4 million of that bonded amount.

The goal is to start construction next June and have students in the new school by the fall of 2018.

However, Hall was just one of five aging elementary schools that were identified in our Buildings for Our Future initiative in 2012. The initiative established that those schools needed to be upgraded to ensure all Portland elementary students attend school in a facility that supports academic excellence and safety needed for 21st century learning.

The other four schools are Longfellow, Reiche, Presumpscot and Lyseth.

We are grateful to Mayor Strimling and the City Council for your collaboration with the school board in this effort. This summer we sent you a \$70.6 million bond proposal to pay for renovations at those schools. You voted to create the School Facilities Ad Hoc Committee to study the bond proposal.

Thus far, the committee has toured each school and gathered critical information. From those tours, we learned that our buildings are well maintained, but are antiquated. We are in the process of scrutinizing costs and the financial impact of a bond to pay for these schools. The committee plans to send a recommendation to the school board in November.

We look forward in the months ahead to continue our work with the council on these infrastructure needs. These improvements will have lasting effects on our children's education. Academically great and safe neighborhood schools will also attract families and improve our local economy, making Portland an even better city.

In conclusion, as we reflect on the present and look toward our future, we must remember all of our children and adult learners deserve the best we can offer.



Let's continue our work together. Our students—both children and adults —are relying on us. They need our support.

As I was reminded when I met the young boy at Central Office, let's share in the excitement of all of our learners whether they are starting kindergarten, receiving their high school diploma or celebrating in their new mechanics certification. We are not only elected officials, but also are stewards of our students' education, hopes, and futures. Let's maintain their enthusiasm and develop lifelong learners. Their success means we all succeed.

Thank you and good night.

