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Complex Challenges and New Opportunities: Building the Framework for Boundary Review. An Assessment of PPS's Organizational Readiness and Options for Citizen Engagement


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Complex Challenges and New Opportunities: Building the Framework for Boundary Review

An Assessment of PPS's Organizational Readiness and Options for Citizen Engagement

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Executive Summary

On February 25, 2013, the PPS Board unanimously approved Resolution 4718, which directs staff “to develop and recommend a process for a comprehensive review of school boundaries district-wide and policies related to student assignment and transfer to better align with the Racial Educational Equity Policy and promote strong capture rates and academic programs at every grade level.”

To deal with the student assignment and transfer policy issues, Superintendent Carole Smith charged the “Superintendent’s Advisory Committee on Enrollment and Transfer” (SACET) with recommending changes to student assignment and transfer policies to bring them into alignment with the district’s racial educational equity policy. As for the District-wide Boundary Review component, in December 2013, Portland Public Schools entered into an Intergovernmental Agreement with the Center for Public Service (CPS) at Portland State University (PSU) to assist the District with eventually achieving two important tasks:

1. Devise and implement a process to engage a wide range of current and future PPS parents, students and staff, community organizations; and other key stakeholders to conduct a comprehensive District-wide Boundary Review and recommend new PPS school boundaries for adoption by the Portland School Board;
2. Create a flexible and dynamic “Boundary Review Framework” on which the current and future boundary-setting processes will be based.

CPS proposed a three-phase approach for the “PPS District-Wide Boundary Framework” project, which would include recommendations at the end of each Phase as to recommended next steps. As initially outlined from the vantage point of October 2013, the proposed approach would be as follows:

- Phase I (3 months): Initial Assessment and Framework Recommendations
- Phase II (7-8 months): Stakeholder and Community Engagement
- Phase III (4 months): Final Recommendations, Community Deliberations, and Decision Making

This report concludes Phase I and includes the Findings and Recommendations from our Initial Assessment.

Overview of Background and Context

Fewer than 10 years ago, the outlook for PPS was gloomy: declining enrollment, shrinking budgets, and low graduation rates. The outlook for PPS is much brighter in 2014. Enrollment is growing and is projected to continue doing so for the foreseeable future. In the last three years, high school completion rates have risen from 62% to 67% across all schools (including alternative schools). Student test scores in the district are also up modestly in most schools. As a result of several recent events – the 2013 Legislature’s record \$7 billion appropriation for K-12 schools, voter approval of a major bond measure; the PAT/PPS teacher contract settlement – this April Superintendent Carole Smith was able to propose the most expansive PPS budget in more than a decade. The budget included funding for the reconstruction of three major facilities – Franklin, Roosevelt, and Faubion - and money to hire 180 new teachers.

At the same time, about 39% of PPS's students are now enrolled in school facilities that – by current PPS definitions and guidelines – are either over-enrolled or under-enrolled. But while the Board's decision to conduct a district-wide boundary review is widely recognized as needed, *how* to go about this important task is a significant challenge, and the main focus of this Phase I Assessment. For further information about the history and dimensions of PPS's boundary situation, see Background on p.10.

Lessons from Other Districts

A review of other districts' experiences with enrollment-balancing and boundary review show they are largely driven by a range of local factors and historical contexts that make generalizations about "likely success paths" difficult to make. Virtually everyone we interviewed spoke to the inherent contentiousness of this process; even the most carefully crafted, patient, and credible process will likely cause significant controversy, especially among parents who believe boundary changes will adversely affect their children's educations.

However, in interviewing representatives from 14 school districts around the country, we learned several key lessons that could be valuable for PPS: establish values; be patient and don't rush the process; have a strong committee to lead the work; know your facilities, programming, and other needs prior to starting; ensure community input is reflective of the community; review boundaries on an ongoing basis; and have data readily accessible to the public. For more information, see Lessons from Other Districts on p.15.

Initial Assessment Findings and Conclusions

CPS/NPCC team has organized its Findings and Conclusions in two categories: PPS Organizational Capacity and Readiness and Stakeholder and Community Engagement Considerations. Table 1 presents an overview of these findings and conclusions. For additional information, see Initial Assessment on p.19.

Table 1: Overview of Findings and Conclusions

	Findings	Conclusions
Organizational Capacity & Readiness	PPS lacks internal clarity and alignment on the purpose and goals of the proposed District-wide Boundary Review (See Finding 1.1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The immediate-term capacity crisis seems to be driving the strategy for achieving the much-larger equity goal, which risks undermining PPS's credibility with the community and potentially fails to make the changes that will positively impact both enrollment and equity. Building internal clarity and alignment among and between key PPS officials before embarking on this major district-wide initiative presents a significant opportunity to build credibility and lasting success within this difficult and contentious arena. Additional resources and clarifications of expectations and roles would build the internal capacity necessary to conduct a district-wide boundary review that engages staff throughout PPS and leads to a successful process.
	PPS has well developed policy tools to address enrollment, but they are not explicitly tied to policy priorities (See Finding 1.2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PPS has strong policy tools in place, but without prioritization or explicit criteria outlining when or how they are used, the decisions feel ad-hoc. PPS has an opportunity to tie its strategies to policies and goals by creating Board-level policy guidance to staff as to which options to consider first, and on what basis to recommend a given approach over another.
	Policy ambiguity and inconsistent practices create confusion and mistrust (See Finding 1.3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communities want clear articulation about when and how community input will be used in district decision-making Some previous PPS decisions lacked clarity on the policy or principles behind them. PPS now has an opportunity to clearly tie actions and strategies to district-wide goals and policy principles. Without clear policies, principles, and transparent decision-making, PPS may make political decisions, rather than goal-oriented policy decisions for District-wide Boundary Review.
	PPS has great data capabilities, but key boundary review information isn't easily accessible (See Finding 1.4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparing and making available some additional data analyses could help inform boundary review discussions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Longitudinal enrollment and school program comparisons Qualitative "customer satisfaction" School facility and decision framework analysis
Stakeholder & Community Engagement	Stakeholders have mixed perceptions and understanding of "District-wide Boundary Review" (See Finding 2.1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Among community members there are varying degrees of knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the district, which results in lack of "starting place" for District-wide Boundary Review discussions. Because PPS has not conducted boundary reviews routinely, the public perceives boundaries as relatively permanent and expects the boundaries that result from a District-wide Boundary Review to be permanent as well.
	Stakeholders are skeptical that boundary review can address inequity (See Finding 2.2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Imbalance of power and inequitable offerings across the district will create "winners" and "losers" unless those issues are addressed.
	Capacity to engage the public is not uniform across the district (See Finding 2.3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although they vary across the district, infrastructure and community organizing capacity exist in many schools and community-based organizations, but accessing it and utilizing it will require time and resources.
	Willingness to engage is high, but mistrust is a challenge (See Finding 2.4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Much of the public's willingness to participate is rooted in mistrust and fear, rather than in opportunity. Further, a real or perceived lack of transparency in district decision-making leads some under-represented communities to believe that people with high influence and power can sway district officials to get what they want.

Recommendations and Proposed Decision-Making Framework

Rather than move immediately to launch its District-wide Boundary Review process, and before embarking on any community engagement portion of this effort, PPS should first address issues that CPS/NPCC found in the initial assessment:

- 1. Establish shared understanding**—Between and among central administrative leadership, management, the Board, and school building staff, PPS should establish a shared understanding of the District-wide Boundary Review, its goals, scope, key components, and how it fits in with the district’s other strategies.
- 2. Establish and normalize policy principles and practices**—PPS should establish and normalize policy principles and processes that are non-negotiable components of the process and determine where the district has flexibility, where it does not, and how to articulate that internally and externally.
- 3. Clarify roles of participants**—PPS should ensure that participants—staff and stakeholders— understand their role in the process. Carefully and precisely clarifying roles at the onset of the process will support and carry further the “shared understanding” of this process. Since District-wide Boundary Review will require significant engagement, support, and implementation of results from staff at all levels of the organization, CPS/NPCC recommends that PPS produce a “responsibility chart” that outlines the roles of key individuals and groups in the boundary review process and the implementation of its results. Further, CPS/NPCC believes boundary review should be coordinated and aligned wherever practicable with the SACET policy review process.
- 4. Build infrastructure**—CPS/NPCC recommends that PPS prepare, in advance, a package of useful data and analysis that will help inform parents and stakeholders and support the District-wide Boundary Review conversations. PPS should also put in place at the outset a “Community Organizing Infrastructure” strategy so that a community engagement effort can begin as soon as Phase II is launched.

Once PPS is ready to officially begin its District-wide Boundary Review and decision-making process, we recommend the following four-step general structure and sequence:

- **Step I: Values and Core Principles**—Prior to developing or discussing any proposed maps or a long-term framework for future boundary reviews, it is important for PPS to first identify and articulate a set of underlying values, core principles, and decision-making criteria against which actual boundaries and related policies will ultimately be judged.
- **Step II: Decision-Making Framework**—At the end of Step I – and again, prior to any specific boundary maps or related policies being recommended by PPS officials—the PPS board should formally adopt the framework that will be used to evaluate subsequent proposals on specific boundary lines and a long-term boundary review framework.
- **Step III: Boundary Maps and Framework Options**—Based on the Step II Framework adopted by the Board, PPS officials should solicit community input that will result in specific recommendations on boundary-related strategies that are deemed consistent with and designed to help achieve PPS’s mission and adopted educational goals.

- **Step IV: Formal Adoption of New Boundaries and Long-Term Boundary Review Framework**—After one or more recommended boundary maps, frameworks, and ancillary policies are identified and the public is provided ample time and opportunity for input, the PPS Board should make its final decisions.

The PPS/NPCC team recommends that no later than August 1, 2014, PPS officials should make an explicit decision on the timing and pace of its District-wide Boundary Review process. This decision, in turn, will have major implications for how best to structure – and what is realistically possible – relative to an effective community engagement process during these four steps.

More specifically, CPS/NPCC has identified three potential approaches to the timing and pace of its District-wide Boundary Review process:

- Option I would be a mathematical rebalancing of students across schools, based primarily on PPS’s existing boundary change policies. This option would largely be a staff-led process, with very limited community engagement. Staff would propose new boundaries no later than the Fall 2014, the Board would vote on new boundaries no later than January 2015, and new boundaries would be in place for the 2015-16 school year.
- Option II would follow the same timeline as Option I – with new boundaries decided upon and in place for the 2015-16 school year – but would strive for greater involvement of the PPS community, with input solicited across a wider range of policy goals, beyond mathematical re-balancing.
- Option III would provide significantly more time for community engagement – both during the Phase I “Values and Principles” stage, and during the Phase III stage of “Boundary and Framework Options” (in the four-step proposed framework above). This approach would culminate in PPS Board decisions no later than January 2016, for full implementation in the 2016-17 school year.

While many PPS officials have expressed a hope to have new boundaries in place by the 2015-16 school year, such timing is not required by current Board policy. Options I and II would likely mean that the District-wide Boundary Review process and any community engagement would need to be launched shortly after the end of the current 2013-14 school year, with the bulk of the effort during Step I (“Values and Core Principles”) being concentrated during the months of summer and early Fall.

Under any option PPS chooses, it will need to ensure transparent decision-making is in place. For more information on Recommendations and the Decision-Making Framework, see p.36.

Introduction

In 2012, Portland Public Schools launched an enrollment balancing process within the Jefferson High School Cluster to “create the enrollment stability necessary to support effective teaching and learning for students at every school” (Carole Smith, 2/1/13). During a somewhat contentious process that resulted in the closure of two schools, concerned community members, especially within the Jefferson cluster, urged PPS to undertake a district-wide approach to student assignment and transfer policies, as well as a District-wide Boundary Review. At a January 26, 2013 community meeting in the Jefferson Cluster, parents and teachers called on the district for long-term solutions. One Jefferson teacher and parent pleaded, “Our schools in this cluster need stability. Our schools, for so long, have been reconfigured and reinvented. I wouldn’t blame parents for transferring from their neighborhood school if they don’t know one year to the next what programming will be there. No matter what we do, I ask that we think long-term about the stability.” Another parent said, “All of the proposals I’ve seen are short-sighted band-aids... I’ve seen many [proposals], but I haven’t seen any that demonstrate how this process is affecting the capture rate in my neighborhood...I want someone on the school board to have some vision to...make a change that...[will] invest in us and will make our schools better.”

In response, on February 25, 2013, the PPS Board unanimously approved Resolution 4718, which directs staff, “to develop and recommend a process for a comprehensive review of school boundaries district-wide and policies related to student assignment and transfer to better align with the Racial Educational Equity Policy and promote strong capture rates and academic programs at every grade level.”

To deal with the student assignment and transfer policy issues, Superintendent Carole Smith charged the “Superintendent’s Advisory Committee on Enrollment and Transfer” (SACET) with recommending changes to student assignment and transfer policies to bring them into alignment with the district’s racial educational equity policy. As for the District-wide Boundary Review component, in December 2013, Portland Public Schools entered into an Intergovernmental Agreement with the Center for Public Service (CPS) at Portland State University (PSU) to assist the District with eventually achieving two important tasks:

1. Devise and implement a process to engage a wide range of current and future PPS parents, students and staff, community organizations; and other key stakeholders to conduct a comprehensive District-wide Boundary Review and recommend new PPS school boundaries for adoption by the Portland School Board;
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- Phase I (3 months): Initial Assessment and Framework Recommendations
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- Phase III (4 months): Final Recommendations, Community Deliberations, and Decision Making

To conduct the Phase I work, CPS partnered with PSU's National Policy Consensus Center (NPCC). The major purpose of the Phase I Initial Assessment deliverable was to determine whether PPS was sufficiently prepared to meaningfully and constructively engage the public in a District-wide Boundary Review process – and if so, to recommend the type, scope, and timing of such a community engagement process. To make this determination, the CPS/NPCC team and PPS officials agreed upon three major deliverables within this Phase I Scope of Work (SOW):

1. Data Collection & Analysis

- a. Collect and analyze existing data from PPS and other relevant sources
- b. Collect information from district officials to provide an understanding of the current “state of affairs” for embarking on this work
- c. Review district policies and past practices regarding boundary changes;
- d. Determine what important information is missing, or needs updating;
- e. Research other school districts across the U.S. with a goal of identifying 6-8 districts that can be used as benchmarks and useful comparisons.

2. Stakeholder & Community Engagement

- a. Identify an estimated 25-30 key individuals and/or organizations whose knowledge, diverse perspectives, institutional positions, and/or current or past involvement in PPS issues are important in helping design an effective Stakeholder and Community Involvement Strategy;
- b. Conduct interviews and/or focus groups to collect feedback from key identified individuals and organizations;
- c. Evaluate the viability of using broad citizen engagement tools;
- d. Recommend a broad-reaching community engagement process to help determine the key values, relevant criteria, and tools needed for future project phases based on a thorough analysis of research, interviews and focus groups, and other relevant information, including input from key PPS leaders

3. Decision-making Framework

- a. Recommend a decision-making framework for use in Phase II that will produce both an initial set of boundary recommendations for 2015-16 and a long-term “Boundary Review Framework” capable of being used for 20-30 years.

The CPS/NPCC conducted its work between December 16, 2013 and April 30, 2014. During most of this period, PPS was engaged in contract negotiations with the Portland Association of Teachers. While a strike was averted in mid-February and a new contract signed, several months of uncertainty presented significant challenges to the timely gathering of information and the interviewing of key stakeholders, especially those on the core management team and outside the district. As a consequence, the original agreement for Phase I was modified with a no-cost extension of 30 days, from March 31, 2014 until April 30, 2014.

During Phase I, CPS and NPCC worked collaboratively with PPS staff to assess PPS's internal capacity and ability to meaningfully engage the public in a District-wide Boundary Review process. The teams used a variety of assessment and interview tools as follows:

- PPS policy and process analysis
- Analysis of student assignment and boundary change processes from other school districts nationwide

- Interviews of other school district officials and national experts
- Stakeholder interviews, both internal and external
- Analysis of existing PPS data
- Strengths Weakness Opportunity Threat (SWOT) analysis
- Attendance at district-led and school-led meetings on enrollment and facility issues

Accordingly, the findings and recommendations of this Phase I assessment are based on several dozen, in-depth interviews and information sessions with PPS officials, as well as 29 meetings with internal and external stakeholders that reflect the views of more than 100 people. In addition, the team researched and/or interviewed 20 individuals from outside Portland, including school officials in 14 other districts and states, and national experts on school enrollment and boundary issues. We also attended 10 community, SACET, and district-led meetings.

This report concludes Phase I. It contains CPS/NPCC’s findings and recommendations for next steps in designing a successful District-wide Boundary Review process. A well-designed process will then provide a strong foundation on which the PPS Board and staff can make credible and educationally-sound decisions related to boundaries in order to best achieve its stated mission to better address racial equity and educational achievement for all its students.

The CPS/NPCC team especially wants to acknowledge the cooperation and help of Superintendent Carole Smith and her management team – and especially Judy Brennan, the Director of Enrollment Planning – as well as the many hours of time given by leaders and members of SACET. Both the time people gave – and the candor they expressed – were invaluable contributions to this effort.

Background

Seven years ago, Portland Public School (PPS) Board members, staff, parents, and citizens were asking the same basic questions their counterparts are asking today:

1. What has occurred with PPS student enrollment during the previous five years? That is, what do we already know that could shed important perspective on the current situation, and future trends?
2. Based on the available demographic, housing, and other relevant information we have– what is our best, data-informed projection as to PPS’s student enrollment in five years? (Back then, for the 2012-13 school year). For 10 years hence (2017-18)?

The answers in 2007 and today about PPS enrollment numbers – both actual and projected enrollments – perhaps frame the district-wide boundary review challenge facing the PPS district better than anything else.

During that 2007-08 school year, PPS student enrollment was 45,083. This represented a dramatic plunge of more than 5,000 students from the 2002-03 enrollment of 50,334 – the equivalent of “losing” two 500-student elementary schools, each and every year, for a half-decade.

Making a difficult situation worse, the decline varied widely across the district, hitting communities of color and/or lower-income neighborhoods especially hard. More than 70% of this enrollment decline had occurred within just three of PPS's then-nine "High School Clusters." Schools within the Jefferson cluster in North/Northeast Portland lost 2,015 of those students during this period. Southeast Portland's Franklin cluster (805) and Madison (731) were also hard hit. Meanwhile, one of those cluster areas – SW Portland's Lincoln cluster – had actually grown, by 305 students.

The "forward look" from the vantage point of 2007-08 wasn't exactly rosy, either. While PPS's plummeting numbers were expected to slow and eventually bottom out, by 2012-13 PPS still projected 500 fewer students, at 44,588. By 2017-18, there was expected to be only a small uptick to 45,489 total students – a level still nearly 5,000 students below 2002-03 enrollments, 15 years before.

What PPS officials decided to do as a result of this picture is a familiar– and to many parents, staff, and citizens still a painful– story. Based on actual declines, and a projected "steady state" situation (at best) for years to come, between 2002 and 2007, the PPS Board voted to close or re-purpose 15 school facilities.¹

What a difference just a few years can make.

In its August 2012 official Enrollment Forecast, PPS noted that actual 2012-13 student enrollments stood at 46,517—nearly 2,000 more than what was projected just five years earlier. From the vantage point of 2012-13, 2017-18 looked even more different: a projected K-12 enrollment of 48,706 students, more than 3,200 compared to the 2007-08 forecast.

The 2012 forecast also predicted that PPS would be enrolling even more students in 2021-22 than it was in 2002-03, when it began to close more than a dozen schools.

Dynamics at Play

At the outset, it's important to emphasize that no school boundaries ever can – or should be – viewed as "permanent." Even with "steady state" enrollment at the district level, significant changes at the individual neighborhood levels will make some boundary adjustments inevitable. This is why a proposed new set of PPS boundaries in the relative near-term represents only half the equation. Just as important – or perhaps more so – is a proposed new framework that would allow PPS officials to continue to adjust and change those boundaries for years or even decades beyond that.

It's also important to note that there are a number of separate but often inter-locking issues that directly relate to future school facility use and capacity – and which inevitably affect how citizens will likely view any proposed District-wide Boundary Review process. Four factors in particular are worth discussing in more detail: changing demographics, school configuration, enrollment and transfer policies, and enrollment and capture rates.

¹ The elementary and middle schools closed or re-purposed between 2002-07 included Applegate, Ball, Brooklyn (now housing Winterhaven), Clarendon, Edwards, Kellogg, Kenton, Meek, Smith, Rose City (now housing ACCESS Academy, and temporarily housing Marysville. Some Beverly Cleary students will also be housed there in 2014-15), Whitaker, Wilcox, and Youngson. Vocational Village High School was also closed. In the 2008-13 period, PPS shuttered Humboldt and Tubman schools; closed Marshall High School; and considered closing Jefferson as part of a major "high school re-design" process.

Changing Demographics

This spring (April 2014), Portland State's Population Research Center, which provides enrollment projections for the district and all its individual schools, will release its latest forecast. Projected students are expected to be up even more. Based on a combination of demographic data and new housing data provided by Portland city officials, it's plausible that by 2030 PPS will be enrolling 55,000 or even 60,000 students.

Based on today's best available information – and forecasting tools, while imperfect, have improved considerably since the mid-2000s – the biggest facility and boundary-related challenges facing PPS (now, and for the foreseeable future) have little to do with the need to *expand* existing boundaries, so that remaining facilities can accommodate students once assigned to recently-closed facilities. Rather, the challenges increasingly involve the opposite scenario: *shrinking* existing boundaries to deal with serious over-enrollment issues in certain facilities, and contemplating options to increase space; or re-opening recently closed schools, or even build or open new schools.

While increased enrollments may bring a whole different set of dynamics into play, they also require boundary changes as over-crowded schools may likely need to shrink, shedding students and re-assigning them from one "Neighborhood School Catchment Area" to another. (Throughout this report, the abbreviation "NSCA" will be used for this important term, which defines the geographical area from which each neighborhood-based school is expected to draw its students). Though the underlying causes for boundary changes may differ, the effect on parents and students is no less felt. For those who prefer their current neighborhood school, being "re-districted out" of one's school feels just the same, regardless of whether it's the result of declining or growing enrollments.

School Configuration

During the last decade, while PPS was closing more than a dozen school facilities, the District also embarked on a major initiative to "re-configure" certain schools and the grade levels they accommodated. Seven middle school programs (Grades 6-8) were terminated. Today, more than 4,000 6th to 8th graders now attend K-8 programs, while about 5,500 still attend Grades 6-8 middle schools.

This change was not adopted uniformly across the district. All seven middle schools closed between 2005 and 2008 were East of the Willamette River. Only one neighborhood K-8 school operates on the West side of PPS: Skyline, whose 267 students not only makes it the smallest neighborhood school in the entire PPS system, but puts it nearly 250 students below what PPS considers the proper "target size" to ensure an appropriate range of educational choices and offerings.

Most of the middle school/K-8 changes were heavily concentrated in certain parts of the district – especially in North, Northeast, and Southeast Portland's Jefferson, Roosevelt, Franklin, Madison, and Marshall clusters. The district's seven remaining middle schools on the East side are primarily in the Grant, Cleveland, and Franklin clusters

PPS's decision to reconfigure elementary and middle schools was aligned with research that shows better performance from low performing students by allowing them continuity with peers and less disruptive transitions. However, the District not only adopted this major grade re-configuration in a non-uniform way across the district; it did so in the absence of an explicit policy finding as to the educational goals and standards that would be used to evaluate the results.

During the CPS/NPCC stakeholder interviews, there was notable skepticism (and even some anger) from many community members at how these decisions were made and implemented. It's likely this recent experience will affect how certain community members view the district's boundary review process. Even among those parents who now may strongly support their K-8 programs, these changes added another layer of disruption to communities already grappling with the closure of neighborhood schools.

Enrollment and Transfer Policies

A third major dynamic also has direct relevance to today's school boundary landscape. During the last decade – which was dominated not just by declining enrollments and grade re-configurations but also reduced program budgets and increased class sizes— the district continued to rely on and even expand its long-standing practice of giving parents options outside their NCSAs/neighborhood schools. As a result of a variety of focus option programs and schools, alternative programs, and a liberal transfer policy, approximately 33% of elementary students now attend a school outside their own neighborhood – and the same is true for about 30% of middle school students and about 35% of high school students.

Many parents – as well as current and past PPS officials and Board members – strongly support the current arrangements and the flexibility and choices they provide students. Some PPS officials even credit this approach during the last decade with helping convince many PPS parents to keep their students in the public school system, rather than opt for private school or other alternatives. Between the 2000 and 2010 censuses, students within the PPS boundaries who were enrolled in non-PPS schools – e.g. private schools and home-school options – rose just 2%, from 16% of the total to 18%. And even at 18%, PPS still has one of the lowest rates in the U.S. among larger urban school systems. Advocates argue that without such flexibility Portland's school closure situation might have been much worse.

But today, to an increasing number of parents and PPS officials, many of these current policies and practices are seen as reinforcing educational inequities and exacerbating underlying patterns of racial and socioeconomic discrimination, leaving certain schools in the poorest and most diverse neighborhoods to struggle amidst continuing enrollment declines and less robust programs.

Accordingly, existing PPS policies and practices related to enrollments and transfers is the subject of a far-reaching review by a diverse group of citizens on the Superintendent's Advisory Committee on Enrollment and Transfer (SACET). In 2013, Superintendent Carole Smith charged SACET with recommending changes to PPS's Enrollment and Transfer policy. Draft recommendations are expected later this spring. Certain potential policy changes under review could have a major impact on boundary-related dynamics.

Enrollment and Capture Rates

The "capture rates" of various facilities also varies dramatically. For students in five elementary school catchment areas – Ainsworth, Alameda, Buckman, Stephenson, and Forest Park – 85% or more attend their neighborhood school. Meanwhile, at the spectrum's other end, for six other elementary schools – Bridger, Creston, King, Vernon, and Woodlawn – the "capture rate" is less than 50%. This divergent picture is even more dramatic at the

high school level. Lincoln (87%), Wilson (86%) and Grant (83%) capture the vast bulk of their NSCA's, PPS-enrolled students, while Madison (56%) and Roosevelt (53%) struggle.²

The amount of discretion that PPS decides to allow in the assignment of students will have an enormous impact on how to establish (and periodically adjust) the boundaries of neighborhood school catchment areas. Yet even if transfers are tightly constrained, or even disallowed in some cases due to crowding issues, managing sudden and unforeseen shifts in underlying enrollment patterns can still pose real challenges. This can be illustrated by looking briefly at where perhaps the most growing pains within the entire system can be found, at Beverly Cleary K-8 in NE Portland.

During the 2008-09 school year, there were just 557 students at Beverly Cleary, whose K-1 students attend the former Hollyrood Elementary School while students in grades 2-8 attend the former Fernwood Middle school. Just 57% of PPS-enrolled students within this neighborhood school catchment area (NSCA) attended Beverly Cleary; the remaining students attended other PPS programs.

By the 2010-11 school year, enrollment had grown to 606 students at Cleary, which was already taxing the two physical sites that comprise the current school. By 2012—13, 730 students were attending (70% of the NSCA) and the district projected 773 total by 2017-18. That number was exceeded, and then some, when 814 enrolled this current year (2013-14).³

Though it offers the most dramatic example within the PPS system, Beverly Cleary is not alone in experiencing rapid enrollment spikes. During the last five years, other fast-growing schools include Sabin (39%); Abernethy (35%); Kelly (33%); Llewellyn (31%); and Bridger (31%).

The causes and the effects of such rapid growth vary widely. Enrollment hikes seem more driven by changing demographics and/or behavior patterns at the neighborhood level. For example, families with young children may be deciding to remain, transfer their children to, or even move into particular NSCAs based on the high reputation of a given school. Some NSCA parents – who'd earlier decided to send their students elsewhere – might even have decided to pull them back to their neighborhood school.

Meanwhile, other PPS schools, at the other end of the spectrum, are losing students (despite overall district gains). In the last five years, enrollments at Rosa Parks, Atkinson, Vernon, and Jackson (6-8) declined by more than 10% due to declining neighborhood population and limiting transfers in from other schools.

As of October 2013, for all K-12 programs, 16 schools across seven of the eight high school clusters were over-enrolled.⁴ Meanwhile, 18 schools across seven of the eight clusters have

² Students in the Jefferson cluster have dual enrollment options and may enroll in Jefferson or another designated high school.

³ Even at 814 enrolled students, another 268 students within the Beverly Cleary NSCA attend other PPS schools; even a small fraction of them deciding to "return closer to home" would put additional and unforeseen stress on the system, further suggesting that boundary adjustments of some kind are needed.

⁴ Capacity is currently defined by utilization rate, which compares the number of classrooms to the number of teachers assigned to a building, or 1500 students in a high school.

lower enrollment than PPS’s targeted enrollment. Combined, 18,839 or approximately 39% of PPS students are in schools that are over or under enrolled.

The need to balance enrollment – and alter PPS’s existing neighborhood school boundaries – is abundantly clear. The main question is: How should PPS go about this major obligation, in a way that it can reach a credible and sustainable solution, using existing data and community input, to create boundaries that promote strong capture rates and academic programs at every school?

Lessons from Other Districts

A review of other districts’ experiences with enrollment-balancing and boundary review show they are largely driven by a range of local factors and historical contexts that make generalizations about “likely success paths” difficult to make. Virtually everyone we interviewed spoke to the inherent contentiousness of this process; even the most carefully crafted, patient, and credible process will likely cause significant controversy, especially among parents who believe boundary changes will adversely affect their children’s educations. The CPS/NPCC team looked to other parts of the U.S. for best practices in boundary review. We interviewed several national experts whose perspectives included many districts, as well as district officials from 14 school districts.⁵ We learned that there is no one right-way to do boundary reviews, but each district provided lessons that could be useful as PPS begins the process.

The Executive Director of the Center for Reform of School Systems (CRSS) based in Houston, Texas, emphasized the importance of basing school boundary changes on a clear set of expressed values that reflect broad community agreement, but noted that even that won’t guarantee a smooth process. “You can have beautiful criteria, but still get ‘killed’ by those who see their ox getting gored,” she notes. “It makes for a long campaign, and you’ll be accused of terrible things. But you need to do it—so when you do have to answer to the media and the public, you’ll be able to say you had a process that was based on broad community input.” In her opinion, very few districts approach boundary review as they should. “Boards should take the time to set the policy first—but even that is painful enough, so they tend to wait until they have to do the actual boundaries, since they’re going to get beat up anyway.”

➤ **Lessons: Adopt values with community input and be patient with the process**

Tampa, FL—William Lazarus, of Seer Analytics, provided a similar perspective.⁶ In the late 2000s, he consulted on a school boundary review process for the Hillsborough County (Tampa) Florida school district. Hillsborough, a district four times PPS’s size with 200,000 students, was faced with changing boundaries for

⁵ CPS/NPCC researched boundary processes and/or interviewed district representatives from school districts in Boston, MA; Denver, CO; Hillsborough County, FL; Hood River, OR; Houston, TX; Montgomery County, MD; Minneapolis, MN; Louisville, KY; Oakland, CA; Salem, OR; San Francisco, CA; Seattle, WA; Tillamook, OR; and Washington, DC. The practices found in the examples above were found in multiple districts.

⁶ PPS contracted with Lazarus’s company, Seer Analytics to forecast and model PPS high school boundaries during the 2010-11 High School System Design.

approximately nine of its 23 high schools due to a growing population and the need to build new facilities.

Lazarus says the district spent several years engaging citizens around the question of basic values and principles, deliberately choosing not to introduce any maps into the process until broad agreement could be forged on these underlying principles. More than 80 public meetings were held, some with hundreds of participants and others with just a handful. Lazarus explained the process this way in an article for School Administrator:

“By removing maps from the equation and setting decision rules based on community values, the project team communicated the message that boundary solutions would be generated without considering specific communities and households. Everyone would be treated impartially and fairly. As one team member said, the team “couldn’t guarantee equity of outcome but could ensure the basic fairness of the process.”

In an interview, Lazarus also stressed the importance of time and patience. The values eventually adopted by Hillsborough could easily fit on a single page – they involved racial diversity, short walking distance and/or low transportation costs for kids getting to their schools.

Based on this first stage, Seer then applied sophisticated data analytics to create a series of 79 “boundary scenarios” that gave different weights to various criteria. After more community meetings and discussions, the scenarios were winnowed down to four by school district staff, based on more community discussions regarding the values earlier agreed to. When the Hillsborough School Board eventually settled on one recommendation, it was unanimously approved – “with not a single parent or community member speaking out against them.”

(As relatively smooth as the high-school related boundary changes in Hillsborough turned out to be, however, the district decided not to go forward with a more sweeping set of changes around the district’s middle schools.)

➤ **Lessons: Let values and a strong committee guide the process**

Hillsboro, OR— Hillsboro, Oregon concluded a relatively quick (but also relatively small) boundary adjustment process in March 2014. Nevertheless, it too was driven by strongly expressed values identified by the School Board that were already in place when this adjustment process began. They include: minimizing disruptions; making a change that is sustainable for the long-term; considering transportation costs; creating an appeals process; and equity.

In Hillsboro’s case, a specific set of housing developments triggered the need to determine where new students would be assigned, and how those assignments would impact the District as a whole.

The District’s relationships with the City and County allowed them to anticipate the new housing, and the District to convene a Boundary Committee, including the principal and a parent representative from each impacted school, according to a staff-driven proposal.

After six committee meetings, five community meetings, and an additional question and answer session, the evolved plan was unanimously approved by the Hillsboro School Board. That approval came approximately three months after the District announced the formation of the Boundary Committee.

➤ **Lesson: Understand your needs and challenges prior to launching the boundary review**

Seattle, WA—PPS's "peer districts," those of similar size, with similar characteristics and capture rates, have also experienced recent growth and boundary adjustments. Seattle Public Schools' enrollment has been—and is projected to continue—climbing. The five-year projection period between 2011-2016 is expected to see nearly 5,000 new students, increasing the student population from 48,496 to 53,376. In response to recent growth and in anticipation of more, the School Board adopted its "Growth Boundaries" plan in November 2013. New boundaries will be rolled out between 2014 and 2020, as newly constructed schools come online, requiring boundary shifts for existing schools. These changes follow another recent boundary-setting process for SPS: until 2011, SPS didn't have boundaries or guaranteed neighborhood schools.

The Growth Boundaries project was short and Board-driven. The project took place between April 2013 and November 2013, beginning with the Board adopting "Guiding Principles" for the process and ending with a unanimous vote in favor of the new boundaries. But Tracy Libros, Manager of Enrollment and Planning, noted that the boundary adjustment process came on the heels of a major construction levy, for which the district had assessed facility needs, capacity issues, and future enrollment projections. She said that SPS had spent about a year compiling all of its data and designing a process, prior to actually launching the process or any community outreach. Libros stressed the importance of "nailing down" everything possible before starting a major boundary change. For example, she suggested that PPS figure out all of its programming needs and locations, facilities challenges, capacity, and other outstanding questions prior to beginning a dialogue with the public.

Seattle's "Guiding Principles" include grounding decisions in data; equitable access to services and programs; maximize walkability; cost-effective transportation; maintain features of the New Student Assignment Plan; minimize disruptions; be mindful of fiscal impact; and be responsive to family input. Libros noted that although the guiding principles helped ground the process and gave the Board a backstop, "it's naïve to think the process will go smoothly."

➤ **Lessons: Ensure community input is reflective of the community and review boundaries on an ongoing basis**

Minneapolis, MN—Minneapolis dealt with declining enrollment for several years until a recovering economy and real estate market allowed for improved mobility and resulted in increasing student population. After plummeting from 38,411 in 2005-06 to 33,584 in 2009-10 – a decline in scale similar to that experienced by PPS – enrollment in Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) has rebounded by nearly 3,000 students, to 36,451. Additional growth of another 3,000 is projected within five years. That influx caused an urgent need to rebalance populations with facilities and programs, while lowering class sizes. Amid great controversy, in December 2013, the Board approved a five-year forward-looking enrollment plan.

While the external forces brought the issue to the fore, the District spent considerable time identifying and refining core values. The Board and Superintendent

brought conversation starters to a community engagement process. Despite, and probably because of their efforts, the District recognized the challenges of ensuring an accurate reflection of the community through an engagement process. Their district is divided into three areas, each of which have monthly meetings. These monthly meetings formed the core of the community engagement process, and each meeting included breakout groups and reports back. In addition, the District used these community meetings as the basis for online surveys and FAQs posted on social media, as well as public Q&A exchanges. It was an iterative process, and because the Board put such an emphasis on public input, the entire process took nearly twenty-four months.

The driving values Minneapolis settled on do not resolve themselves easily. On one hand, the District sought to minimize disruption, and to emphasize community schools, but on the other hand, the District also sought schools that reflect the City's population as a whole. That tension remains, and as Minneapolis looks to the future, school officials express relief that they made the rolling five-year plan subject to annual review. They also are eager to continue working on further refinements to the expression of their driving values, and improved communication between internal and external stakeholders.

➤ **Lesson: Readily accessible data highlights key information about schools**

Denver, CO—Denver Public Schools (DPS) has seen enormous growth in the last 10 years, with most of that occurring in the last seven years. Between 2003 and 2013, DPS enrollment increased from 72,188 to 88,208, making Denver one of the fastest growing urban school districts in the country. Denver officials attribute the single biggest reason for this enrollment growth as an increase in the proportion of Denver families choosing to send their children to DPS. Between 2000 and 2010, the population of school-aged children in Denver only grew by 2%, while student enrollment grew by 14.5%. Additionally, DPS has increased its graduation rates; this alone, they say, accounts for 2,000 of its “new” students.

DPS allows significantly more choice within its system than even PPS. While students are, by default, assigned to their neighborhood school, any student can apply to attend any school in the district. Across K-12 grades, 53% of students attend a school other than their neighborhood school, with that number ranging from 3% to 82% for individual schools. There are two rounds of application processes to choose the desired school.

However, a 2010 Institute for Innovative School Choice report noted that there are significant inequities in this system. For example, the first round of choice,

“Requires people to behave differently depending on whether or not they are satisfied with their home school. Those who are willing to attend their home school can take risks and apply to popular schools in Round 1, while those who are unsatisfied with their home school must be careful about listing popular schools. If those who are unsatisfied with their home schools are not accepted to their Round 1 choices, they will be forced to attend their boundary school. These families should consider listing less popular schools as choices (misrepresenting choices) simply to make sure that they are accepted somewhere, and that is precisely the wrong set of incentives one would want.”

(The report illustrates many other inequities in DPS's system, such as a non-centralized sub-process that allows principals to "save seats" for desired students and individual schools having the ability to establish their own criteria for weighing transfer applicants.)

With so much growth and so much choice, Denver is building new schools and adjusting existing boundaries as necessary. And even with this level of choice, boundary changes are contentious, often because of the inequality of schools between neighborhoods, in some part, due to the numbers of students enrolling in schools other than their neighborhood school.

Despite significant equity issues and more movement between neighborhood schools than PPS sees, DPS offers one very important lesson to PPS: it has a great deal of accessible data on the programs, quality, and performance of each school in the system. Each year, DPS publishes the School Choice Enrollment Guide, designed to help parents make school choices and to plainly see the differences between schools. DPS uses a School Performance Framework (SPF) rating to measure each school's performance. The comprehensive rating aims to tell how well a school is able to meet the needs of its students using student academic growth, student academic proficiency, parent satisfaction, re-enrollment rates, and student engagement to create a rating. Based on the percentage of points scored, schools are rated: Distinguished, Meets Expectations, Accredited on Watch, Accredited on Priority Watch, or Accredited on Probation.

Each district faced challenges unique to its community, but used a process or had tools in place to ease tensions. As further discussed in Finding 1.2, PPS already has a strong boundary change policy in place. Adapting some, or all, of the lessons above could further strengthen PPS's position for a successful District-wide boundary review.

Initial Assessment

At the outset, it should be noted that PPS embarks on its District-wide Boundary Review effort in a significantly stronger position to achieve success and win community support than it would have possessed had it launched this initiative several years ago. In addition to shrinking enrollments and 15 school closures, much of the last 10 years has been characterized by budget cuts, staff reductions, and mixed (or worse) indicators of educational achievement.

When PPS undertook its high school redesign effort in 2010-11, it was driven in part by the recognition that less than 64% of its 9th graders were completing high school within a four-year period – one of the state's lowest rates, and one worse than many districts with significantly fewer resources. In many K-5 and K-8 schools – especially those serving communities of color and low-income students – fewer than 75% of third graders were reading at grade level, and high school completion rates were closer to 50%.

Though profound challenges still remain, in the last three years, high school completion rates have risen from 62% to 67% across all schools (including alternative schools). Student test scores in the district are also up modestly in most (though not all) schools. As a result of several recent events – the 2013 Legislature's record \$7 billion appropriation for K-12 schools, voter approval of a major bond measure, and the PAT/PPS teacher contract settlement – this April Superintendent Carole Smith was able to propose the most expansive PPS budget in more than a decade. The budget included funding for the reconstruction of

three major facilities – Franklin, Roosevelt, and Faubion - and money to hire 180 new teachers.

Combined with the retirement or departure of 220 existing teachers, 400 new teachers will come into the PPS system for the 2014-15 school year (representing approximately 14% of teachers), more than at any time in recent PPS history. By the 2019-20 school year, PPS officials project that half its teachers will have been hired since 2014.

In addition to increased resources, some positive indicators of improved educational achievement (though with a long road to go); and (for now) largely settled labor-management landscape, the CPS/NPCC team also identified some other strengths:

- A strong capability in the data and policy analysis realm, which will assist in making data-driven decisions;
- An agreed upon and oft-enunciated policy on equity and a commitment for educational achievement for all students;
- The recent development of credible processes and citizen engagement approaches for big issues – e.g., the SACET group to look at enrollment and transfer policy; and
- A (mostly) successful high school re-design process, which, while contentious in several parts of the district, has largely “settled” most high school boundary issues for the foreseeable future, thereby providing some certainty amidst an already complex landscape.

In October 2013, as discussions for this assessment were underway, PPS leaders anticipated and publically discussed a proposed a District-wide Boundary Review process that would begin in Spring 2014, produce proposed maps by Fall 2014, invite community feedback throughout the fall, and then result in a Board vote in January 2015, with new boundaries implemented in time for the 2015-16 school year.

Between December 2013 and April 2014, CPS/NPCC conducted this assessment with a major goal of helping PPS determine whether and how it could meaningfully and constructively engage the public in a District-wide Boundary Review process, and how and whether it could follow the proposed timeline. More specifically, we approached this assessment to determine whether PPS had the foundational readiness or set of agreements in place among key PPS officials before asking for broad community input on boundary-related questions. These include the following:

1. Shared understanding of the vision, goals, and scope of the work;
2. Normalized policy principles, criteria, processes so that staff and stakeholders know the parameters or structure of the process;
3. Clarification of the roles and expectations of central administrative leadership, principals, regional administrators, the Board, and the community in guiding and supporting and implementing the results of a District-wide Boundary Review process; and
4. Infrastructure to support the community engagement and data needs of the process

We identified several key factors—from our analysis of district operations conversations with stakeholders—that could significantly hamper the district’s ability to engage the public successfully in this process within the original proposed timeline.

1. PPS Organizational Capacity and Readiness

PPS operates in a fast-paced, mission-critical environment to provide more than 48,000 students with a quality education. During the Initial Assessment CPS/NPCC analyzed internal operations, policies, and practices within PPS to determine the current “state of affairs” for embarking on this work. We identified several internal organizational factors that will affect a District-wide Boundary Review.

Finding 1.1—PPS lacks internal clarity and alignment on the purpose of the proposed District-wide Boundary Review

District officials have pointed to the District-wide Boundary Review process as the primary tool that will bring relief to students crammed into cafeterias-turned-classrooms and those whose academic experience suffers from too few students. Balancing enrollment, officials say, will increase stability district-wide.

However, Resolution 4718, unanimously approved by the Board on February 25, 2013 directs PPS staff to conduct District-wide Boundary Review and review PPS’s Enrollment and Transfer policy to, “better align with the Racial Educational Equity Policy and promote strong capture rates and academic programs at every grade level.” One goal of the Racial Educational Equity Policy, states: “The District shall provide every student with equitable access to high quality and culturally relevant instruction, curriculum, support, facilities and other educational resources, even when this means differentiating resources to accomplish this goal.”

In addition, District officials stated that the objectives of the District-wide Boundary Review process are “to align school structures and boundaries to support strong academic programs at every school” and “to formalize and normalize a process for adjusting boundaries on an on-going basis.” Reviewing those goals and objectives, we find that District-wide Boundary Review involves increasing capture rates, strong academic programs across the district and across grade levels, curriculum, facilities, other educational resources, school structures, and developing a formal process to review boundaries as necessary.

PPS has emergency enrollment issues on one hand – and a far-reaching policy goal to create a more equitable system across the district on the other. However, there does not appear to be agreement across PPS regarding the role that district-wide boundary change will play in achieving the policy priorities of the district, or the desired results of such a process in the immediate and long term. For example, it is unclear, or as yet undetermined, if the primary role of proposed district-wide boundary process is to balance enrollment, preserve core programs and curriculum, preserve strong neighborhood schools, create more equitable access to programs for all students – or some combination of some or all of these goals.

Neither the PPS board, nor its staff has clearly articulated PPS’s policy priorities in these arenas, or how existing policies will interplay with District-wide Boundary Review. Nor is it clear whether there are “non-negotiable” principles or priorities that could serve as a starting point for boundary discussions. When nothing is “off the table,” then everything (including revisiting high school re-design, grade re-configuration, etc) theoretically remains a potential topic for citizen input.

Finally, in addition to the lack of clarity and alignment between the immediate needs for a District-wide Boundary Review—enrollment balancing—and the longer-term goals of District-wide Boundary Review—equity and formalizing and normalizing the process for

future boundary adjustments—CPS/NPCC observed a lack of alignment, support, and/or engagement in District-wide Boundary Review among key PPS leaders and staff.

As noted above, and strongly reinforced by the experience in other Districts, a successful and comprehensive District-wide Boundary Review will require commitment, attention, and focus from staff throughout the entire organization. During the four-month assessment phase, CPS/NPCC had difficulty engaging several key staff in interviews and meetings. Specifically, CPS/NPCC attempted to schedule time with PPS leaders to get internal agreement about the proposed boundary review process and answer difficult questions that our team would likely encounter from stakeholders. Such a meeting was never scheduled or held. Further, it took more than two months to schedule one-hour interviews with some staff and repeated requests for interviews with other staff were not returned in time for this assessment. We recognize that PPS was deeply engaged in labor negotiations with the Portland Association of Teachers and facing an unprecedented teachers' strike during this Initial Assessment. However, we observed other standard district processes—such as the school lottery and budgeting processes—fully occupying staff attention and availability, which suggests that even under normal conditions, PPS is operating at full capacity.

Finding 1.1 – Conclusions

- It is clear that PPS needs to balance enrollment across the district, and that the steps that PPS is taking toward racial equity in education are necessary, important, and commendable. However, CPS/NPCC found that the immediate-term crisis in facility capacity – e.g. overcrowding at Beverly Cleary and a handful of other schools – seems to be driving the strategy for achieving the much-larger equity goal. This risks undermining the district's credibility with the community by sending mixed messages about the intent of district-wide Boundary review. Further, it potentially fails to make the changes that will positively impact both enrollment and equity, and create a successful process for future boundary decisions.
- PPS has an opportunity to build internal clarity and alignment among and between elected board members, PPS central management, and key school personnel (e.g. principals, teachers, and other staff) before embarking on this major district-wide initiative. Doing so presents a significant opportunity to build credibility and lasting success within this difficult and contentious arena. Proceeding without first establishing internal alignment and clarity on the scope, purpose, values, and desired results of District-wide Boundary Review will significantly hamper PPS's ability to conduct a district-wide process that has broad internal support within PPS, as well as broad external support with the PPS community.
- PPS staff appear to be operating at maximum capacity. Additional resources and commitments from staff at all levels of the organization, as well as clarifications of expectations and roles, would build the internal capacity necessary to conduct a district-wide boundary review that engages staff throughout PPS and leads to a successful process.

Finding 1.2—PPS has well-developed policy tools to address enrollment balancing, but they are not explicitly tied to policy priorities

District officials are deeply aware of and immersed in the significant challenges and complexities regarding enrollment balancing. PPS has a wide range of enrollment balancing tools available to it as officials work to align enrollment with strategic academic goals. As

outlined in the Student Assignment Review & School Boundary Changes Administrative Directive (4.10.049-AD), these options include:

- **Limiting transfers**—In the most recent lottery, 21 neighborhood schools were closed to transfer due to large enrollment.
- **Adjusting building capacity**—In recent years, facility adjustments to increase capacity have been made at at least 17 schools including Beverly Cleary, Harrison Park, Richmond, Arleta, and Lee.
- **Moving programs**— In 2013, ACCESS Academy moved from Sabin, a growing neighborhood school, to Rose City Park, a closed neighborhood school.
- **Changing grade configurations**— In 2012, Rigler K-8 School converted to a K-5 school, with middle-grade students assigned to Beaumont Middle School. This change intended to ease overcrowding at Rigler and provide Beaumont with a second feeder school, providing greater enrollment stability to both schools.
- **Opening or closing a school**—In 2011, Marshall High School closed. In 2012, Humboldt PK-8 closed, moving those students to Boise-Eliot. Additionally, the Tubman Young Women’s Leadership Academy closed. In 2013, Chief Joseph and Ockley Green consolidated and the arts-focus program at Ockley Green closed.
- **Changing boundaries**—In 2011 PPS changed boundaries for three high schools and set up dual assignment zones for three high schools. In 2012, a boundary change affecting the NE Portland Schools Alameda, Beaumont, Irvington, and Sabin intended to ease overcrowding at Alameda and stabilize Irvington and Sabin. In 2013, PPS implemented a boundary changes between Duniway and Llewellyn in Southeast Portland.

While PPS has a formal policy and administrative directive guiding the process once boundary change is selected as the tool for a particular enrollment challenge, CPS/NPCC could not find formal criteria or prioritization of policy tools that lead up to boundary change (or others). The directive gives administrators discretion to choose the option that best suits a particular challenge, with only school closure and boundary change requiring Board approval.

Informal criteria has been articulated, but not adopted or communicated district-wide. According to a district official,

“PPS tries to identify the solution that moves the least amount of kids, disrupts the fewest academic programs and costs the least amount of money. The order of solution needs to be tied to the specifics of the problem. Principal, teacher and community input are important filters in selecting the best solution, as well. For example, both Rigler and Sabin had the option of boundary change or grade reconfiguration to solve their enrollment problems (Sabin too small, Rigler too big). The Rigler community strongly preferred grade reconfiguration, while Sabin strongly preferred remaining a K-8 and growing the boundary.”

All of the options have different benefits (a facility change keeps neighborhoods intact, whereas a boundary change doesn’t destabilize programs) and drawbacks (a facility change is expensive, and a boundary change might take years to see results). As noted above, different communities prefer different solutions, and few would argue that the same tool could or should be used to solve every enrollment challenge. But without formal criteria or priorities, it is difficult to determine how PPS makes these decisions.

Finding 1.2 – Conclusions

- PPS has in place a strong policy that outlines how boundary changes take place in the district, and a robust set of policy tools to balance enrollment. However, without formal criteria or policy priorities tied to broader strategic goals to guide administrators, the decisions feel ad-hoc. In the absence of formal criteria, a strong communications plan outlining how and why decisions are made would increase transparency and understanding.
- Utilizing enrollment balancing strategies without formal priorities and criteria on how such policies and strategies are used results in unpredictable changes for families across the district. PPS has an opportunity to tie its strategies to policies and/goals by creating Board-level policy guidance to staff as to which options to consider first, and on what basis to recommend a given approach over another. A general principle of “minimal disruption” seems to be in play – though this might lead to a series of short-term changes that ultimately prove more expensive and/or less effective than a longer-term strategy.

Finding 1.3— Policy ambiguity, inconsistent practices, and the lack of transparent decision-making in several key arenas creates confusion and mistrust

As noted above, there are a variety of policy tools to balance enrollment on an on-going basis. In addition, there are past district actions in these areas that communities were unhappy with. Inevitably, each of these factors will arise during a district-wide boundary review and any community engagement process associated with it. CPS/NPCC found ambiguity and inconsistent practices across these areas. Specifically:

- **Boundary Changes**—The Student Assignment to Neighborhood Schools (SANS)(4.10.045-P (policy) and 4.10.049-AD (administrative directive)) assigns students to their neighborhood schools and provides guidance to the Superintendent on reviewing enrollment on an ongoing basis. It provides enrollment balancing options and guides the boundary change process, if that is the tool selected.

Although there is a policy in place, boundary change processes have not been conducted the same across the district. According to one district official, this has resulted in “unequal and inequitable” ways in which PPS has engaged different school communities in the enrollment balancing process, with “differentiated results across the district.”

Under the current boundary change policy, which took effect in 2009, there have been three notable boundary changes (described on p.23). In addition, the closure/consolidation of under-enrolled Humboldt with Boise-Eliot resulted in an expanded boundary for Boise-Eliot.

The Marshall High School closure, while not decided by community input, included robust support for the transition and opportunities for community members to weigh in on new boundaries and feeder patterns. The Northeast and Southeast enrollment balancing processes included heavy participation from the affected communities as part of the decision-making process. However, because the Humboldt/Boise-Eliot process was technically a consolidation due to budget constraints, rather than a boundary change, it didn't go through the boundary change process. Therefore, it

didn't include a community engagement component, leaving the affected communities feeling angry and frustrated by the district's swift action.

- **Programs and Focus Options**—The Educational Options Policy (6.10.022-P), which discusses programs in schools and focus options states “the Board’s intent is to provide an opportunity for all students to apply to educational options within the Portland Public School District, promote equity and diversity in the admission of students to educational options and minimize barriers to participation in educational options.”

PPS operates an extensive system of focus programs and schools – stand-alone schools and programs that are not directly tied to a catchment area. As of the 2013-14 school year, approximately 5,000 of PPS’s 48,000 students were attending a non-neighborhood-based K-8, middle, or high school (such as Winterhaven, Creative Sciences, Richmond, daVinci, or Benson); one of seven “Selected Focus/Alternative program” schools; one of approximately 20 “Community-Based” and “Special Services” programs; or one of eight “Public Charter Schools.

The district also operates focus options *within* existing PPS neighborhood schools, primarily language immersion offerings. However, options are not equitably distributed across the district, and getting into some of the programs is based on neighborhood and sibling preference. Of the 17 language immersion programs around the district, nine (53%) are in SE Portland, four are in NE Portland (24%) and two each are in SW and N Portland. Students’ initial admission to most of these programs is based first on neighborhood, with 50% of slots reserved for neighborhood students, and then the lottery system (though under existing policy siblings of already admitted students are often given preference for attending the same program). Neighborhood preference combined with the location of most of these programs means that many underserved students in N/NE don’t have the same opportunities or options as others.

Further, decisions to open, close, or move programs are not transparent or widely understood. Moving programs can and is used as an enrollment balancing strategy to increase enrollment at an under-enrolled school or decrease enrollment at a crowded schools. However, it is often not clear if and when these moves are simply driven by the need to balance enrollment; if/when they are tied to specific policy priorities; or if/when they are tied to the district’s broader goals.

- **School size and configurations**—As noted earlier, in 2006, PPS embarked on a major initiative to “re-configure” certain K-5 and 6-8 grade schools to K-8 schools. Seven middle school programs (Grades 6-8) were terminated. Today, more than 4,000 6th to 8th graders now attend K-8 programs, with about 5,500 still attending middle schools.⁷

However, this process was inconsistent across the district. Most of these changes were heavily concentrated in certain parts of the district – especially in North, Northeast, and Southeast Portland’s Jefferson, Roosevelt, Franklin, Madison, and

⁷ This change was not adopted uniformly across the district. All 7 closed middle schools were East of the Willamette River, while only one neighborhood K-8 school operates on the West side of PPS.

Marshall clusters; schools on the west side were unaffected.⁸ Parents felt that the decision-making process was not transparent. Perhaps more important than where the change rolled out, is how the change rolled out. The PPS Board did not establish values, policy goals, a policy statement, or specifically articulate as Board policy how this limited reconfiguration strategy was intended to achieve particular educational goals.

Leaders of the national move toward K-8 programs note that goals of the reconfiguration are to increase academic achievement, and create an environment more conducive to learning (Yecke, 2006).⁹ However, some PPS parents believe that rigorous preparation for high school and important options, like science labs or band, are lost in a K-8 environment. In other cases, some parents who initially opposed reconfiguration now support it, such as when PPS presented this as an enrollment balancing option to Beverly Cleary parents in January 2014 to relieve severe overcrowding and parents supported maintaining Beverly Cleary's K-8 configuration.

Additionally, PPS staff have informally established targeted school sizes (currently 450 for elementary schools, 500 for K-8 schools, and 600 for middle schools). These have not been formally adopted, nor are they even feasible for some school facilities under current school configurations. These targets are meant to allow multiple classrooms for each grade, and a reasonable base of school-wide programs to offer a robust, educational program to a diverse group of students. The district also classifies as "over 100% utilization" – that is, "overcrowded" – a school whose student population has given it more teachers than it has classrooms to put them in.

Based on these definitions, 15 of 26 K-5 programs are still below "target" – though two of these are already above 100% utilization. Of the 11 at or above target, four are now "overcrowded." The situation is even more challenging with the district's 27 K-8 programs. 18 of 27 are still "below target" – four of which are also classified overcrowded – while five of the nine at or above the target are now "overcrowded."

- **Facilities and Capacity**—PPS uses facility changes to relieve crowding, but it lacks policies and criteria to support facility-related decisions. There is no policy or criteria used to determine when to bring another facility online or when to use a facility adjustment to relieve enrollment issues vs. another strategy.

In addition, the district does not have a comprehensive analysis of each of its schools' capacity, nor does it have an agreed-upon formula or model for determining capacity. PPS currently uses the number of teachers assigned to a building and the number of classrooms to determine a "utilization" rate, but the size, quality, and functionality of classrooms vary widely across the district. PPS's 2012 Long Range Facilities Plan identifies three options for measuring capacity—the Facilities Model, Number of Classrooms Model, and the Instructional Space model. However, PPS facilities staff interviewed noted that nearly every building has special considerations (e.g. noise), and therefore a capacity model needs to be flexible and account for the space needs of different programs.

⁸ Albeit a more welcome and positive change, the rebuilding of several schools funded by the 2012 PPS bond measure will mean additional disruption and temporary relocation to other facilities for students in the Roosevelt, Franklin, Grant, and Faubion (middle school) communities.

⁹ Yecke, C. P. (2006, April). Mayhem in the middle: Why we should shift to K–8. *Educational Leadership*, 63(7), 20–25.

According to district officials, because PPS’s enrollment was in decline for so many years before the current growth, measuring capacity was not a critical need. However, under the current growth trend – which, according to forecasts, will continue into the foreseeable future (about two decades) – it will be difficult to “right size” schools without such a current capacity assessment.

Additionally, according to Facilities staff, their work and budget has shifted focus from deferred maintenance to adjusting capacity, including adding modular classrooms, converting common areas to classrooms, and adding walls to increase the number of classrooms. While adjusting building capacity is an option available to the Superintendent to address enrollment issues, as noted above, Goal 3 in the Long Range Facilities plan states, “Portland Public Schools will engage in an enrollment balancing process including but not limited to transfer limitation, attendance boundary changes and grade reconfiguration *before* implementing school consolidation and facility changes” (LRFP, 2012; emphasis added). As noted above, PPS lacks criteria for determining when to implement a particular enrollment-balancing tool, including whether and when to adjust buildings, rather than boundaries.

Finding 1.3 – Conclusions

- Inconsistently applied processes for changing boundaries and engaging—or not engaging—affected communities has created deep tensions and mistrust toward the district, which, in part, resulted in the Jefferson community calling on the district for a District-wide Boundary Review process. However, CPS/NPCC concludes that it is not just a district-wide process that people want, but also a clear articulation from PPS about the parameters for community engagement—i.e., which decisions should involve the community, and how community input will be used for decision-making.
- Some previous PPS decisions lacked clarity on the policy, impetus, or principles behind them (e.g. grade re-configuration and placement of special focus and other choice-driven educational programs), which appears to have resulted in programming and options that are inconsistent across the district. Further, articulated school enrollment targets (albeit it, informal ones not adopted as Board policy) can’t be reconciled within many of the district’s buildings and configurations, further confusing the boundary change discussion. However, going forward, PPS has an opportunity to clearly tie actions and strategies to district-wide goals and policy principles.
- Without clear policy principles, criteria for implementing them, and a communication strategy for advertising them, the “winners” in District-wide Boundary Review will likely be perceived (perhaps correctly) as those who can simply amass the greatest political support. In the absence of some core policy agreement on central goals that should be central to a district-wide boundary change process, PPS may be widely perceived as ultimately making political decisions, rather than goal-oriented policy decisions.

Finding 1.4—While PPS’s data collection and policy analysis capabilities across a wide range of school characteristics and enrollment-related metrics are impressive, key information important to citizens for a District-wide Boundary Review process either doesn’t yet exist, or isn’t currently available in a clear, readily accessible format.

While PPS does a notable job gathering and analyzing large quantities of data for public distribution, some important information is not yet readily available to parents, staff, students, and community members. The CPS/NPCC team believes such information could significantly increase PPS’s ability to have a successful and inclusive dialogue with the community as it redraws existing boundaries and creates a framework for long-term boundary adjustments and change.

PPS already has ample raw data and capabilities to prepare reports that enable users to better understand enrollment trends at individual schools. Through its Data and Policy Analysis division, PPS for many years has compiled and published a wide range of reports containing important data and information about its schools, students, and programs. The major reports issued by the Data and Policy Analysis division can be found here: <http://www.pps.k12.or.us/departments/data-analysis/index.htm>

The most comprehensive report PPS publishes each year – its “School Profiles and Enrollment Report” – runs to 305 pages in its latest 2012-13 edition. The report includes summary information for the district and detailed “School Profiles” for each of the districts’ schools.

In our assessment of PPS’s data and our interviews with stakeholders, we identified three specific types of information that PPS lacks in a readily accessible manner that would be useful for the District-wide boundary review process:

I. Longitudinal Enrollment and School program-based comparisons

PPS’s many publications and reports already contain some longitudinal views of key metrics, such as overall enrollment by facility over 5 or 10-year periods, and multi-year school test scores. But other important information - such as year-to-year changes in students leaving or choosing to transfer out of a given neighborhood school catchment area (NSCA) and year-to-year changes in PPS-eligible students within each NSCA – aren’t regularly reported for each school.

Similarly, the School Profiles contain nothing that simply details year-to-year enrollment projections (based on previous years’ “best available information”) compared to actual enrollments. Parents and community members can’t easily tell whether a significant gain or loss in enrollment had long been predicted – or was a sudden surprise. For that, they must sort through past annual reports.

PPS’s rich data set also includes a great deal of information about NSCA student demographics and student and school performance. Such “quality-centric” metrics are certainly fraught with controversy, and must be approached carefully. But PPS already publishes such information – and parents as well as prominent third parties routinely use this information to compile and publish their own “school ratings.”

For example, the website for popular real estate aggregator Zillow includes PPS school ratings, on a 1-10 scale, for each individual neighborhood school tied to a given Portland address. Zillow’s ratings in turn are drawn from Greatschools.org, whose website and analytical model draws on PPS data found in its School Profile reports. Those ratings vary

widely; not surprisingly, schools ranked 1-3 are common in many racially diverse, lower-income neighborhoods, while more affluent parts of the district (SW Portland, and parts of inner NE and SE Portland) boast a number of “10s.”

Whatever one’s views of the validity of student test scores and such ratings, these and other student and school performance metrics exist as part of the “information landscape” available to parents. Judgments about the quality of individual schools – whether based on reality or simply perception – will inevitably be an important part of the District-wide Boundary Review conversation. Matching and presenting to the public key quantitative data – e.g. students moving in and/or out of a NCSA over time – and arraying it against this and other relevant qualitative data over the same time period will provide a clearer picture upon which both parents and PPS staff can base important decisions.

II. Qualitative “Customer Satisfaction” information

Whether the quality of a given public service is actually and demonstrably excellent, middling, or deficient – or simply perceived as such – often can matter less than what parents and community members believe to be true.

Portland Public School District is one of the Oregon’s top 10 employers (public or private), with over 2,800 teachers and nearly 5,000 total FTE. Each year, it directly serves about 48,000 students by providing an essential public service. Its “core customers” also include an estimated 100,000 parents and other custodial adults directly responsible for these students and school choice decisions.

It is unclear, however, how all of these customers – within each of PPS’s NSCA’s – currently view their local schools and what their perceptions are based on. For example, how knowledgeable are they about key factors such as class size or trends in student test scores, and how have these perceptions changed over time?

Nor does PPS’s data reveal how current perceptions might likely affect actual behaviors when it comes to issues that directly affect any kind of “boundary setting” discussion. Which factors are most important in determining whether families decide to or try to leave their NSCA?

These are not questions PPS currently asks in any systematic, methodologically sound way. For an enterprise of this size and complexity, the preponderance of detailed quantitative information – viz. the relative dearth of this and other kinds of qualitative information – is striking, though hardly unusual among public sector enterprises generally.

For most private organizations of this size, the failure to routinely gather such information would risk ultimate business failure as customers’ needs and perceptions shifted without their knowledge. And while PPS officials clearly track how parents and students “vote with their feet” each year – that is, choose not to attend their neighborhood school in favor of another PPS-option – they appear to have few tools beyond anecdotes and perceptions as to these underlying decision-making processes, among various categories of parents.

III. School Facility Capacity and Decision Framework Analysis

During one of the public meetings attended by CPS/NPCC personnel this spring, a parent made the following comment: “We aren’t over-enrolled; we are ‘under-facilitated.’”

For parents who want to keep boundaries intact – especially those living near the outer edge of a boundary, and thus most vulnerable to any change causing them to be placed into another NSCA – this isn’t a totally illogical response. As noted earlier, parents know that

PPS officials have often turned to facility-focused options, short of boundary changes, to accommodate extra students beyond their projections. Indeed, if a community perceives that a strong *preference* among PPS staff (not to mention Board members) for “minimal community disruption” is essentially a de facto PPS *policy*, then loud and persistent calls for “facility change” can become an effective strategy to delay or even prevent boundary changes.

PPS currently lacks a policy-based, analytical framework to determine the potential viability, costs, and impacts associated with the expansion and/or re-opening of facilities, either on a short-term or long-term basis. What, then, should PPS do, given that , 14 of the District’s 67 K-5, K-8 and Middle schools – and two high schools, Lincoln and Cleveland – are currently classified as having more than 100% utilization, based on having more teachers (a number based on student enrollment) than physical classrooms?

As previously discussed, PPS has a number of strategies to address enrollment. Perhaps the most common, when over-enrollment involves several dozen or so students, is to simply add a few more students to each classroom – though that also means higher student to teacher ratios. Not surprisingly, eight of the 10 schools now classified as “more than 100% utilization” also are among the top 10 in ratio of students per classroom.

But cramming two or even five more students into each classroom has its limitations. As spelled out in a September 20, 2011 memo by Judy Brennan, PPS Enrollment Planning Director, there are other, more substantive strategies PPS has also identified for both “over enrollment” and “under-enrollment” situations that don’t involve adjusting boundaries. One involves locating a “special focus” program to retain or attract more students at a given school; this January, for example, PPS added several language immersion programs, including a Mandarin offering at King. (However, to date PPS has not proposed removing any special focus programs from schools also classified as over-enrolled, such as Lent and Kelly).

Another option is grade re-configuration (e.g. moving from K-8 to K-5, or vice versa – though in theory, other combinations are also possible).¹⁰

In some cases, grade re-configuration (whatever its educational program implications) has helped ease facility crowding problems in the short term. But given how and where PPS has located these programs – especially K-8 schools – it has set up another dynamic that is of potential concern: schools already “over enrolled,” that still hold fewer students than what PPS has determined to be the “target” to ensure sufficient educational program quality.

Of the eight (of 31) K-8 schools already classified as above 100% utilization, four of these (Skyline, Lee, Scott, and Astor) reached this mark before they contained 500 students. Should they grow in enrollment, another eight K-8 schools will also pass this 100% utilization rate before reaching their target size. In other words, more than half (16 of 31) existing K-8 programs are now housed in facilities where they either are now or theoretically could be “over-enrolled” before they even reach their “target” level. This apparent “mismatch” between existing programs and physical space realities will make future changes in this category even more challenging.

¹⁰ In Southwest Portland, what’s known as West Sylvan Middle school is actually located at two separate facilities (6th grade, and grades 7-8). Beverly Clear’s configuration – K-1 at Hollyrood campus, and grades 2-8 at the former Fernwood campus - is another multi-campus option.

A decade ago, as schools were closed completely, boundaries of remaining schools were then expanded to accommodate those students whose NSCA disappeared. Today, the dynamic is the opposite: parents urging no changes in existing NSCAs where schools are over-crowded, and instead suggesting changes in the physical facilities.

Beyond these options is one just beginning to be discussed – though it, too, would cause, not avoid, additional boundary changes: the re-opening of previously closed facilities, or the construction of an entirely new school (something that last happened in PPS in 1998 with Forest Park).

Finding 1.4 – Conclusions

The primary need isn't as much for new data as it is to assemble, re-configure, analyze, and make readily available and accessible existing information relevant to a wide range of parents and other community members during the District-wide Boundary Review process. Specifically:

- **Longitudinal Enrollment and School program-based comparisons**—Mapping and publishing enrollment dynamics along with corresponding metrics and key quality-related trends – such as student achievement, teacher and staff performance, class size, budget, range of program offerings – would give citizens and PPS officials more “early warning tools” for better addressing potential boundary changes and other challenges. Juxtaposing existing (and in the future, newer and better) indicators of “school quality” and student performance with data on how parents and students have been “voting with their feet” could help clarify potential and underlying causes of key enrollment trends. Done properly, such a set of uniform, informative “Dashboard” reports for every PPS school could do more than flag potential under and over-enrollment problems that could lead to future boundary changes. They could also help bring PPS and community focus to possible remediation strategies.

For example, in certain schools that are losing students, more action may be needed to improve the leadership of the school principal and/or the performance of the teaching staff (PPS currently uses a number of budget tools, such as targeted staff resources, for these schools; under its new contract, it will also have several additional tools, including extra school days, more flexibility in hiring new teachers, and increased professional development funds). In other cases – say, where one crowded school is too-rapidly gaining students, located near another with extra capacity – such information might persuade parents to remain in or choose the second school's less-crowded classrooms, especially if its performance has demonstrably been improving.

- **Qualitative “Customer Satisfaction” information** –Regular and statistically valid surveys that measure resident, parent, and (where appropriate) student understanding and perceptions of school quality and performance would have considerable benefits. In the absence of such information, parents will continue to be overly reliant on anecdotes, perceptions, and third-party ratings in making important judgments about school quality and choice. And if more robust and detailed customer survey information helped convince the parents of just 10 students either to stay in – or return to – a PPS school, the district would receive approximately \$68,880 in additional funding through the Oregon State School Fund.

Making a commitment to design and deploy such qualitative tools could also engage parents and community members around a meaningful set of questions – while the

results would give PPS officials important information as to where more attention needs to be paid. This would enhance PPS officials' and the community's ability to be more "proactive" and responsive, to see the beginning signs of potentially bigger problems, and respond accordingly. It also enhances the ability to identify key areas of "cognitive dissonance," where residents' perceptions are significantly at odds with realities on the ground.

- **School Facility Capacity and Decision Framework Analysis**—In the absence of genuine clarity about what might be called the "boundary/facility" policy interface, it's likely that a community wide discussion about boundary changes will continually circle back to the same question: rather than move students to other schools, why not just build (or add) more classrooms to existing schools?

A credible, physical inventory of existing PPS space would help answer key questions likely to arise in the short term. In addition to potential capacity under current classroom configurations – something the district has mapped out – what cost-effective and appropriate potential additional capacity might exist? For example, it's one thing to divide an exceptionally large classroom into two adequately sized ones, or to convert little used storage space into instructional space if it's relatively inexpensive. But what about replacing a cafeteria, or even a library, with additional classrooms to accommodate growth? Or embarking on major renovation work that, on a square foot basis, might be more expensive than building a whole new school?

Because such questions – and others – will inevitably be part of a community engagement process, we believe PPS would be well served by preparing relevant facility information that can be shared with the public to help citizens better understand the possibilities, constraints costs, and even "non-negotiables" inherent in this line of inquiry. Along with such information, additional policy clarification might also be useful, so that discussions about boundary review don't become ad hoc citizen "design sessions" for existing school buildings.

2. Stakeholder and Community Engagement

During Phase I, team members from the National Policy Process Consensus unit of the Hatfield School of Government held 29 meetings with approximately 100 individuals. These conversations suggested that core aspects of a District-wide Boundary Review are not widely understood, but capacity for meaningful engagement does exist. For a list of stakeholders we interviewed, please see Appendix B.

The main findings from these interviews are as follows:

Finding 2.1—Stakeholders have markedly mixed perceptions and understanding of "District-wide Boundary Review"

Overall, among both internal and external stakeholders there is a high level of interest in boundary and enrollment decisions. However, for many external communities, the term "boundary review" is not readily understandable or engaging, particularly in communities that have been under-represented in district and other public decision-making. Many stakeholders did not immediately make the link between academic achievement and boundary and enrollment decision-making. Among many of the stakeholders we interviewed, there was not a clear understanding of the district's racial equity education policy or how it might relate to boundary decisions. (This is not to suggest that there *should* be widespread

understanding of district, but rather to reflect the place from where a district-wide boundary review might begin.) Moreover, most of the people we interviewed see boundary review as inextricably linked to enrollment and transfer policy. As one interviewee said, “People may not understand how important the issue is. ‘Boundary Review’ doesn’t sound like something I should care about; ‘review’ doesn’t sound real.”

Further, even amongst stakeholders who recognize the need to balance enrollment, there is disagreement about the need for a District-wide Boundary Review. While some stakeholders see the enrollment imbalance as a boundary issue, others see it as a facilities issue. Several stakeholders wondered how the District knew that boundary changes needed to be made when “the size or capacity of buildings changes depending on whom you talk to.” Some stakeholders – particularly on the West side of Portland– were more interested in exploring facilities changes than engaging in a Boundary Review discussion.

Among the interviewees who are engaged in the enrollment balancing discussion, there is widespread confusion (and in some cases skepticism) about the data driving both facilities and enrollment decisions and a desire to understand that data better. The confusion covers differences between PPS and City of Portland forecasting approaches; finding and understanding different data sets PPS makes available in different places; and how facilities data is determined (for example, when a building is deemed “over crowded”). Community members generally doubted whether PPS, the City, and Metro (all working on growth projections) are coordinating efforts at all.

Across the district, there are rumors about the planned timeline and process for the project; in fact, even internal district staff expressed surprise that PSU was conducting an assessment for a District-wide Boundary Review. Of the people who do know that the district is preparing for a District-wide Boundary Review, many of them believe that the initial round of boundaries will be “permanent.” Several people echoed one parent who said, “I still see boundary changes as just a band aid. Neighborhoods are going to change and then we’re going to have to go through this all over again in a few years.” Many people couldn’t envision PPS conducting District-wide Boundary Review on a routine basis.

Finding 2.1 – Conclusions

- Among community members there are varying degrees of knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the district, which results in lack of a “starting place” for District-wide Boundary Review discussions. Further, the community doesn’t see this as “their” process, and isn’t convinced that PPS decisions will include or reflect their input.
- Because PPS has not conducted boundary reviews routinely, the public perceives boundaries as relatively permanent and expects the boundaries that result from a District-wide Boundary Review to be permanent as well.

Finding 2.2—Stakeholders express concern about inequities within PPS, but are generally skeptical boundary review can address them

Though most stakeholders we spoke to expressed concern about the achievement gap and inequitable offerings between schools, they also are skeptical that boundary review alone will adequately address equity issues or close the achievement gap. There is a widespread belief that there are inequitable offerings from school to school and that schools do not have

equal capacity to “promote” the programs they do have through their website and other means. That perception of inequality leads to feelings of “winners” and “losers” based on boundaries and enrollment. This is compounded by the notion that there is an actual or perceived power imbalance between communities across the district, particularly in terms of organizing power and/or access to school board members.

Stakeholders from traditionally under-represented communities expressed some skepticism that *anything* could make a difference in improving schools for students of color and other traditionally under-represented students. Those stakeholders also expressed concern that their voices would be drowned out by more powerful interests no matter how the process unfolds.

Finding 2.2 – Conclusion

- Inequitable offerings across the district and a perceived or real imbalance of power will create “winners” and “losers” in the boundary review unless those issues are addressed as part of the District-wide boundary review and actions addressing equity in the district.

Finding 2.3—There is capacity to engage the public, but that capacity is not uniform across the district

Largely due to community loyalty to individual schools and existing organizational infrastructure, there is great capacity to engage the public in the District-wide Boundary Review.

Many stakeholders display tremendous loyalty and commitment to individual schools. That loyalty and commitment enriches the capacity for school-based communities to organize and engage. Teachers, principals, and other school staff have expertise about their own schools and relationships within schools and local communities. In addition, there is capacity for outreach and input collection at individual schools. For instance, some schools already have in place organized groups that have undertaken engagement activities to gather input on priorities and values within their individual school community.

Although school loyalty does enrich the capacity of stakeholders to organize, it also helps create resistance to the idea of boundary changes. While some of those we interviewed had a sense of what is occurring district-wide with regard to boundaries and enrollment, there are many who are unaware of the issues and challenges other schools and / or clusters face. There is some interest in learning about these issues, but overall the primary concerns rest within individual school communities and does not expand to any sense of district identity.

There is also organizational infrastructure both within the district and the broader community to help engage communities of color, non-native English speakers, and other historically under-represented communities. One stakeholder pointed out that this type of engagement would be useful on an ongoing basis: “It will be ideal to have ongoing infrastructure in place for partnering with community based organizations so that it becomes less of a crisis situation.”

Finding 2.3 – Conclusion

- Although they vary across the district, infrastructure and community organizing capacity exist in many schools and community-based organizations. Some schools already have organized groups working to engage parents on values and priorities for boundary review. These groups could serve as models for building capacity in other schools. In addition, infrastructure exists within PPS and in the broader community to engage communities of color, non-native, English speakers, and other historically underrepresented communities, but accessing it and utilizing it will require time and resources.

Finding 2.4 – Willingness to engage around boundaries is high, but a history of mistrust presents a significant challenge

Though there is willingness—and in some cases—eagerness to engage around a district-wide boundary review, much of that willingness appeared to be rooted in mistrust and fear, rather than in a sense of opportunity. There are several sources of mistrust and frustration related to many different past decisions, including decisions by public entities other than PPS. However, much of the mistrust and frustration stems from two things: 1) PPS's past lack of transparency in decision making; and 2) a long-held perception that even if a broad and deep engagement process is conducted, powerful community members will be able to influence PPS decision-makers and ultimately get what they want, regardless of the will of the majority. Several stakeholders expressed fear that they would "lose" if they did not mobilize their community in this process.

There is also a high level of exhaustion, both internally and externally, with public processes initiated by the district. Additionally, some communities continue to raise several earlier PPS decisions, including: 1) the change of several middle schools to K-8; 2) high school redesign; 3) school closures; and 4) earlier enrollment balancing processes.

There is also some mistrust of PPS's organizational will and capacity to consider public input. There is a widely expressed suspicion that decisions are made before the public is asked to participate and that the public is asked only to engage as "window dressing." There are also concerns that PPS will disregard public input and / or that the district lacks a unified, clear vision, providing no real place for the public to have any input. Further, there is concern that decisions may be reversed at any point based on disagreement within PPS.

Internally, some staff members question the need to include a separate public input process for boundary review and believe that decisions affecting boundary recommendations should come from a thoughtful, transparent internal process based on data and staff expertise, followed by Board adoption (and public input at that level).

Ultimately, stakeholders indicated a strong desire to have a clear understanding of which PPS decisions are subject to public input and which are not. One community member summed this desire up, saying, "We need some honesty about limitations. Give us honest, realistic information about what the options [for input] are. We don't want to see what the utopias are."

Finding 2.4 – Conclusion

- Much of the public’s willingness to participate is rooted in mistrust and fear, rather than in opportunity. Many community members will find it difficult to focus on the present and not allow past PPS processes and decisions to cloud their input and judgment, regardless of whether or not these previous issues—like school configurations, high school redesign, or school closures - are formally included in the boundary review discussion. Further, a real or perceived lack of transparency in district decision-making leads some under-represented communities to believe that people with high influence and power can sway district officials to get what they want.

Decision-Making Framework and Recommendations

Developing a Sustainable Process

The question isn’t whether PPS needs to re-adjust its current boundaries. This is a given, though for reasons much different than those of a decade ago (growth and expansion, rather than decline and retrenchment).

The more precise question is this: How can PPS best re-draw its boundaries, consistent with its underlying educational mission and adopted values – to achieve the following two goals?

1. The immediate result (the “Next Set” of District-wide boundaries) enjoys widespread credibility and support among PPS parents, students, and community members; and
2. PPS effectively communicates to its community (including those who are dissatisfied with this “Next Set” of boundary lines, which is inevitable) that it has built a Framework that allows future adjustments and changes to be made in a way that is likely to be fair and equitable.

This is a tall order – *even if* PPS officials currently enjoyed widespread trust and support for past decisions in this arena, and *even if* PPS parents across all racial and socioeconomic lines were broadly satisfied that levels of educational quality and achievement for all students was satisfactory, equitable, and getting better all the time.

The CPS/NPCC team believes that there are two keys to meeting these goals. The first is clear, internal alignment among PPS officials and staff as to what District-wide Boundary Review is about: why it’s needed, and what it needs to accomplish. Is it simply about “enrollment balancing?” Or – as most district officials say – also an important tool to meet the district’s larger goals of “equity” and educational achievement for all? And if so, just how are key terms like “equity” defined; what do they mean in an operational context?

The second is devising an on-going boundary review that does more than solicit community input and feedback on particular boundary changes and related policies. Community feedback – robust, loud, even a little angry at times – is a given in this process, as illustrated by the fact that simple rumors about potential boundary adjustments between two elementary school catchment areas can often prompt hundreds of concerned parents to crowd into school cafeterias to question PPS officials.

Rather, an effective community engagement process is one that reflects an authentic desire by PPS officials (elected and appointed) to not just solicit opinions and reactions to various ideas, but to meaningfully engage those citizens in the basic design and architecture of a new District-wide Boundary Review process. There are key stages to such an effort – and at every one of them, there will be (and should be) meaningful opportunities for all of PPS’s citizens (parents and non-parents, PPS teachers and staff, etc) to weigh in.

This certainly doesn’t mean basic design principles can be ignored, just as houses can’t be designed and built with shoddy materials and bad blueprints. PPS officials must help frame the discussion; this is needed to guide the conversation in ways that help reach a constructive result.

But at the same time, PPS officials must be attentive to too-strong desires to substitute their own “design preferences” for those of their constituents who will live within this new structure. At day’s end, PPS is an organization governed by a democratically elected board, ultimately answerable not to a group of educational experts but to voters in the community. The final result will have a greater chance of being sustainable – and to achieve its desired results – if its perceived to be the result of a sincere and genuine effort to meaningfully engage citizens in all corners of the district, not just in those places where citizens are most apt to be outspoken in the first place.

Immediate Recommendations

The CPS/NPCC team’s work during the Phase I Initial Assessment has convinced us that, rather than move immediately into a full-bore District-wide boundary review as originally contemplated, it is first necessary to focus PPS’s attention internally to ensure that it is well-organized and prepared for this major undertaking. This internal organizational work would serve as a “bridge” between the current Phase I assessment and a well-designed and credible District-wide Boundary Review strategy.

The following four recommendations would serve as this foundation and would build the internal support, clarity, parameters, and infrastructure necessary for this, or any, major district-wide initiative. Proceeding with District-wide Boundary review without the clarity gained from this kind of internal organizational work could produce adverse consequences. These may include inconsistent communications from PPS leadership and staff; lack of Board support; lack of readiness or preparation for the data and information requests that stakeholders will have; and/or unclear expectations of community participants in the boundary change process as to the scope and limits of what their participation is expected to accomplish.

Accordingly, CPS/NPCC recommends PPS accomplish the following before launching its District-wide Boundary Review process:

1. Establish shared understanding

Between and among central administrative leadership, management, the Board, and school building staff, PPS should establish a shared understanding of the District-wide Boundary Review, its goals, scope, key components, and how it fits in with the district’s other strategies.

To do this, CPS/NPCC recommends building support and alignment for a community District-wide Boundary Review boundary review process with PPS Board, management, and staff that would include facilitated internal strategic planning meetings, focus groups, interviews, and/or leadership workshops with PPS

management, staff, and Board members in order to identify, articulate, and align the goals and scope of the District-wide Boundary Review.

2. Establish and normalize policy principles and practices

PPS should establish and normalize policy principles and processes that are non-negotiable components of the process and determine where the district has flexibility, where it does not, and how to articulate that internally and externally.

In our findings, we observed that the district uses six policy tools for balancing school enrollments, only one of which involves boundary changes. We have organized these six tools around the four major types of strategies that PPS is currently using:

- Program/ School Configuration Tools—Program changes, grade configurations
- Facilities-Centered Tools—expansion, closure
- Boundary-Centered Tools—altering individual school boundaries
- Transfer Tools—Limiting transfers

The priorities among these strategies, the rationale for using which combination of strategies when, the criteria for using them, and the way in which PPS will engage the community (if at all) prior to using these strategies was not evident during our Initial Assessment. Answers to these basic questions are important for normalizing community expectations and building transparency prior to an invitation by PPS for community members to participate in a District-wide Boundary Review process. Formalizing principles and processes increases transparency, builds trust, and adds legitimacy.

3. Clarify roles of participants

PPS should ensure that participants—staff and stakeholders— understand their role in the process. Clarifying roles at the onset of the process supports and carries further the “shared understanding” of this process. District-wide Boundary Review will require significant engagement, support, and implementation of results from staff at all levels of the organization. CPS/NPCC recommends that PPS produce a “responsibility chart” that outlines the roles of key individuals and groups in the boundary review process and the implementation of its results.

In addition, CPS/NPCC believes that PPS should coordinate the District-wide Boundary Review and Superintendent’s Advisory Committee on Enrollment and Transfer (SACET) community engagement strategies. This includes working with the SACET and PPS leadership to articulate a proposed strategy that would align SACET’s efforts and recommendations with the District-wide Boundary Review process. It is apparent to the CPS/NPCC team that given the timing and potential impact of key draft recommendations expected soon from SACET, and the close links between Enrollment/Transfer policy and boundary-setting issues, it is vitally important to coordinate the boundary review work with SACET’s work, and to co-develop key components of community engagement.

4. Build infrastructure

CPS/NPCC recommends that PPS develop a Community Organizing Infrastructure so that community engagement can begin at the onset of Phase II. Such infrastructure would include: engaging communities of color and other historically under-represented communities by continuing to build relationships with community based organizations and outreach to parent groups, faith communities, and individuals who are willing to partner with PPS during the engagement process.

Prior to starting the Community Engagement Phase, PPS should also have in place peer-to-peer training, a house party framework and packet, and connection with the City of Portland's Diversity and Civic Leadership Program. If PPS determines, however, that a heavy community engagement strategy should not be part of District-wide Boundary Review, community organizing infrastructure and data will be readily adaptable to other community engagement processes.

In addition, CPS/NPCC identified several potential data analyses (discussed in finding 1.3) that could greatly enhance the community's understanding of the enrollment dynamics and demographics within PPS. PPS should also assemble and make widely available a package of relevant information, perhaps labeled a "Community Guide to District-wide Boundary Review." This should include easily accessible information about current school boundaries; year-to-year trends about individual school enrollments and educational performance; and a "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)" section that describes the purpose and need for boundary review.

These recommendations intend to prepare PPS for the District-wide Boundary Review process and any community engagement strategy included in it. These recommendations should be implemented in Summer 2014.

District-wide Boundary Review Decision Making Framework

Once PPS is ready to officially announce and begin its District-wide Boundary Review process, we recommend the following four-step general structure and sequence:

- **Step I: "Values and Core Principles"**—Prior to identifying or discussing proposed maps or a long-term framework for future boundary reviews, it is important for PPS to first identify and articulate a set of underlying values, core principles, and decision-making criteria against which actual boundaries and related policies will be judged.
- **Step II: Decision-Making Framework**— At the end of Step I – and again, prior to any specific boundary maps or related policies being recommended by PPS officials—the PPS board should formally adopt the framework that will be used to evaluate subsequent proposals on specific boundary lines and a long-term boundary review framework.
- **Step III: Boundary Maps and Framework Options**—Based on the Step II Framework adopted by the Board, PPS officials should solicit community input that will result in specific recommendations on boundary-related strategies that are deemed consistent with and designed to help achieve PPS's mission and adopted educational goals.
- **Step IV: Formal Adoption of New Boundaries and Long-Term Boundary Review Framework**—After one or more recommended boundary maps, frameworks, and ancillary policies are identified and citizens are provided ample time and opportunity for public input, the PPS Board should make final decisions.

Sequence, Timing and Pace Options

Design and execute District-wide Boundary Review strategy: Three Choices

Upon implementation and completion of Recommendations 1-4 above, the district then faces a very important choice. As we see it, PPS has three options for a District-wide Boundary Review strategy: a mathematical rebalancing of students in schools, which would be fairly quick and largely data-driven; a slightly more ambitious strategy, involving some community engagement but focused primarily on relieving the emergency enrollment issues in already identified over-crowded schools; or a longer strategy focused on enrollment balancing, equity, capture rates, and strong programming – which by necessity will entail significant public input and community engagement.

Any option that PPS pursues should include transparent decision-making. We also recommend that regardless of the strategy that PPS chooses, PPS should follow the four-step process noted above – even though the shorter strategies will make it a good deal more condensed.

Below are the three options discussed in a bit more detail:

- **Option I – Data and Policy driven short strategy**—Option I would focus largely on a mathematical rebalancing of students across the district in order to achieve targeted school enrollment figures. According to the Student Assignment Review & School Boundary Changes Administrative Directive (4.10.049-AD) a school boundary changes process would include gathering input from interested parties and include at least one public meeting. The directive states the Superintendent should consider: Feeder patterns; Diverse student body demographics; Compact boundaries; Optimal use of existing facilities; Stable program and enrollment in surrounding schools; Limited impact on students.

A data and policy driven strategy could commence in Summer 2014 and new boundaries could easily be in place in the Fall 2015 for the 2015-16 school year. See Table 2 below for details.

Table 2: Timeline and Components of Option I

Time	Action
Summer 2014	PPS develops proposed boundaries that balance enrollment across the district
Fall	PPS holds community meeting(s) to gather input on proposed boundary changes and makes revisions, if appropriate
January 2015	Board votes on recommended maps
September 2015	New school boundaries in place

Advantages

- **Time and PPS commitment**—The timeframe is condensed and relief to overcrowded schools would be in place by Fall 2015. Further, a process that is largely driven by numbers and follows existing district policy would require

significantly less commitment and organizational alignment than an external process.

Disadvantages

- **Under-represented stakeholders**—Without a concerted and thoughtful community engagement strategy, PPS is unlikely to hear from historically under-represented communities.
- **Doesn't build trust**—This process does little to restore or build trust and support between and among stakeholders and PPS.

- **Option II - Enrollment Balancing and Limited Community Engagement Strategy**—Option II would also allow PPS to complete its work – including the community engagement phase – in time for the 2015-16 school year. While many PPS officials have already expressed a hope to achieve this goal, such timing is not required by current Board policy (e.g. Resolution 4718). This scenario would mean a community engagement process that would take place largely during the summer months, with the board adopting Values in the Fall of 2014, followed by a discussion of actual boundary lines and final decisions needed by January/February 2015.

This limited community engagement strategy would commence in Summer 2014, after the district's internal organizational work is complete. While it would include a steering committee comprised primarily of citizen stakeholders, due to time limitations, it would likely not include broad or deep community outreach.

See Table 3 below for details of Option I.

Table 3: Timeline and Components of Option II

Time	Action
July 2014	PPS establishes an Executive Steering Committee (ESC) representative of the district to guide the process (membership and charge to be determined)
August 2014	ESC establishes values for the process
September 2014	PPS Board adopts values PPS and ESC apply values and data to maps to develop new boundary proposals
October 2014-December 2014	Work with ESC to establish survey and consultation instruments based on map options and boundary proposals Translate instrument Invite community input into the maps/proposals
January 2015	Board votes on recommended maps
September 2015	New school boundaries in place

Advantages

- o **Time**—Although the timeframe is condensed, many stakeholders indicated they did not want to go through a long, contentious process.
- o **More immediate relief**—As previously noted, at least 5-10 PPS schools are facing emergency enrollment issues that need to be addressed as soon as possible. For these schools, Option II would decrease this pressure sooner.

Disadvantages

- o **Time**—In order for PPS to conduct the school lottery process, which provides families an opportunity to choose a school other than their neighborhood school, at its regularly scheduled time in February 2015, and to complete the annual budget, which includes funding allocations for school buildings, staff, and programs, in March 2015, the Board would arguably need to approve new boundaries in January 2015. Working backward, a final set of proposed boundaries would need to be designed by December; community input on proposed maps would take place in October and November; and therefore, proposals for boundary changes would need to be ready for input and review by late September. Even the best-designed community engagement process

likely could not penetrate deeply into the community in just three short months (August-October).

- **Limited community engagement**—A process that launches in July and proposes to have draft maps for review in September or even October arguably does not give sufficient time for a community engagement process that reaches stakeholders who have historically been underrepresented in district decision-making. A shorter process will likely draw participation largely from those neighborhoods and parents whose boundaries are immediately affected, while its compressed nature is also likely to favor constituencies that are already experienced in engaging with PPS. While a short strategy would provide the community an opportunity to comment on proposed maps, it likely would not allow time for a robust process that includes community input into the values that should shape the process or maps. In order to reach many different and distinct communities within the district, engagement will require employing a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional community engagement tools and utilizing a combination of different approaches for online and in-person input.
 - **Process**—PPS has stated that it wants the District-wide Boundary Review process to be a “reset” of how PPS leadership and the Board engage the community, to rebuild trust with the community, and to produce results that are lasting, rather than short-term. A rushed process, with limited engagement, and engagement that is perceived to leave out historically underserved populations or those that have been underrepresented in district decision-making will be “more of the same” from PPS, according to some stakeholders.
 - **Technical Feasibility**—Facilities staff stated that they would need to know the results of final boundary change decisions by November 2014 in order to do budget requests, responding to City of Portland permitting processes (for any construction required), and to prepare buildings for students.
- **Option III - Multi-Phase Engagement Process**—Option III would provide significantly more time for community engagement and as such, allow broader discussion of student achievement, enrollment and transfer choice, programming, and other factors. During interviews, however, not all stakeholders saw the connection between academic achievement, enrollment, and boundaries; as such, PPS would need to develop a strong communications strategy that outlines these important connections.

Such a multi-phase, year-long process would include a combination of approaches to meet the needs of various communities, including information sessions, small group discussions, large public meetings, and online and paper consultation instruments and would include community engagement on both values-setting and boundaries.

For both engagement components—values and maps— strategies that include traditional school-based contact and self-organized smaller gatherings with the support of community organizations and school-based organizers would be used. Option III would include participation targets (based on schools and on other relevant demographic factors) and then support engagement processes designed to meet those targets.

See Table 4 below for details.

Table 4: Timeline and Components of Option III

Time	Action
Community Engagement—Values	
July 2014	Establish an Executive Steering Committee (ESC). Establish a charge, ground rules, time lines, and processes for community input.
August – December 2014	<p>Work with ESC to develop consultation instrument around values</p> <p>Translate instrument</p> <p>ESC engages the community in identifying and adopting values for the boundary setting process</p> <p>Establish outreach goals (e.g. 30% contact and response rate of every school building and X non-PPS parents (neighbors without school-aged children))</p>
January 2015	<p>Board endorses values</p> <p>Use values to determine boundary setting process</p>
Community Engagement—Maps	
February – April 2015	<p>Facilitate Executive Steering Committee (ESC) applying values to boundaries</p> <p>ESC adopts engagement goals, outreach plan, and input infrastructure</p>
April 2015 – September 2015	<p>ESC proposes draft maps, based on values</p> <p>Develop survey and consultation instrument based on draft proposals</p> <p>Translate instrument and conduct outreach based on proposed maps</p>
October 2015	Respond to public input, finalize recommendations
November 2015	<p>Board votes on recommended maps</p> <p>Create ongoing framework future boundary changes</p>
September 2016	New school boundaries in place

The advantages and disadvantages are essentially flip-flopped from Option II. While Option II provides ample time for community engagement, it also means many students are crammed in over-enrolled schools for a longer period of time, which will require more short-term solutions.

No later than August 1, 2014, PPS officials should make an explicit decision on the timing and pace of its District-wide Boundary Review strategy.

Appendix 1 – Additional Background

Recent and painful history

Whenever some schools close their doors, students must be re-assigned to new neighborhood schools, which requires the re-drawing of what we'll refer to here and throughout this report as "Neighborhood School Catchment Areas (NSCAs).

Between 2002 and present, PPS has made dozens of boundary changes as a result of facility closure, grade re-configuration, and/or enrollment balancing. In most cases, these boundary changes were largely confined to just two or three elementary schools, and didn't affect existing "feeder" patterns for middle schools and/or high schools. (That is, even if an elementary school changed, the student could still count on going to the same middle and/or high schools as before).

But in other cases, the boundary adjustments have had a much bigger "ripple effect," setting in motion a cascade of changes that affected a much larger group of parents and students. Most notably and recently, a 2012 enrollment balancing process in the Jefferson cluster resulted in closures, consolidations, and program changes that affected at least five schools in North Portland. And in 2011, the closure of Marshall High School as part of the district-wide high school re-design process disrupted feeder patterns and boundaries for many schools in Southeast Portland.

A demographic sea change

Many parents, especially those whose children pass by a now-closed PPS building on the way to an unfamiliar school, understandably can look back at past enrollment projections and take issue with PPS's decisions and judgments about the need to "right size" and close certain facilities. So it's important to understand the inherent complexities and uncertainties of the enrollment estimating process, and recognize some key factors that can help explain why there's been such a recent divergence between PPS enrollment projections – and experienced reality.¹¹

Among school districts across America, PPS is hardly alone in experiencing unexpected and significant enrollment changes in recent years. One key factor has been the recession – which has affected enrollments in school districts across the U.S. – though often in dramatically different ways.

In many hard-hit Midwestern and Eastern seaboard big-city school districts, a combination of falling enrollments and huge budget shortfalls has led to mass and relatively sudden closures of schools. In the last five years, Detroit has closed nearly 60 schools, and its Superintendent recently announced the planned closure of up to 28 more by 2016.

Recession-spurred budget cuts and plunging enrollments have also forced large closures in other urban districts. In the last few years, local officials have voted to close at least 50

¹¹ An important disclosure: For more than a decade, PPS has contracted with and relied on data and analysis of the PSU's Population Research Center to make enrollment projections. While both entities are units within the school's College of Urban and Public Affairs (CUPA), there is no financial or administrative connection between PRC and PSU's Center for Public Service.

schools in Chicago, 23 in Philadelphia, and 29 in Kansas City (40% of its total). A recent report by Pew Foundation, "Shuttered Public Schools," looks at the experience of these and other large cities in the last few years amidst plunging public school.

(See: http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia_Research_Initiative/Closing-Public-Schools-Philadelphia.pdf)

Yet in other communities, the exact opposite has been occurring. As noted in the Lessons from Other Districts section, Denver, Seattle, and Minneapolis have seen significant growth in the last five years.

Every community's situation is unique, of course; each of the three communities above have somewhat different "drivers" behind their falls, and rises, in enrollment. For example, Denver School officials attribute a rise of 2,000 more students enrolled due to one change: a significant rise in high school completion rates.

But changing demographics within certain urban areas also seems to be behind these dynamics. For example, both Seattle and Portland exemplify trends that have caused demography experts to re-think some long-standing assumptions, as underlying patterns seem to be significantly changing.

In September 2011, for example, the school year started in Seattle with officials confronted with nearly 1,500 more students than the previous year. Students were crammed into hallways and hastily-set up portable classrooms. District officials were reported to be thinking of opening up to half the 12 schools they'd shuttered in prior years, based on falling enrollment projections that had been expected to continue for years to come.

Seattle's experience in misjudging enrollment numbers— described in an influential paper published in November 2011 by demographer W. Les Kendrick – in many ways has been mirrored in Portland. Beginning with its 2010-11 forecast, issued in August 2010, PSU's Population Research Center significantly revised upwards (by about 1,500 students) what it expected in the near term. In effect, the enrollment curve went from gently sloping downward, to abruptly turning upwards for at least the next decade.

School enrollment projections are based on many factors, such as changes in the number and type of existing and new housing units within a school district's boundaries. Another key factor can be the proportion of eligible students whose parents send them to private school or home school options. Based on the 2010 Census, approximately 18% of K-12 age children choose a non-PPS option, though these rates vary considerably by grade level and high school cluster area.

However, neither housing starts nor non-PPS enrollment seems to have played a major role in PPS's recent enrollment surges. (For example, the 2000 Census found just 16% of PPS-eligible students were enrolled in non-PPS educational settings, compared to 18% in 2010). Rather, the key change seems to involve significantly different patterns relating to births and parental migration within PPS's boundaries.

Over the years, one of the most reliable indicators of future enrollment numbers has focused on patterns that involve births of children within a school district's boundaries in a given year – and how many of those potential students stay or move away by the time they're old enough to attend kindergarten or first-grade. During the last decade, women residing within PPS boundaries began having children at a significantly later age. In 1990, just 30% of all births within Portland were to women 30 and older. By 2009, it had almost doubled, to 54%.

Demographers had long documented that before their children reach kindergarten age, more families move out of urban areas (e.g., to suburbs) than the other way around. But even a small change in this “net migration” percentage can have big impacts, and that’s exactly what has happened.

In the fall of 2009, PPS officials learned from PSU demographers that 300 *more* kindergarten students (who were born in 2004-05) had enrolled in PPS as compared to 1999 (and the 1994-95 birth cohort) – even though there had been 300 *fewer* births in that newer cohort.

The likeliest explanation here: older parents tend to be more settled in their living arrangements – e.g., they are more likely to own a home, rather than rent an apartment. Even among renters, there also may be increasing loyalty to remaining in a Portland neighborhood. And with a boom of real-estate construction within PPS boundaries – within the next 20 years, PDX city officials now project about 120,000 new units, including apartments, condominiums, and single-family dwellings.

It’s still unclear whether PPS enrollments might also be driven by other important factors: e.g., the recent recession, changing views towards (or the affordability of) private school options, or a societal shift towards a preference for more urban-based neighborhoods. Regardless, this level of change, rippling through 12 subsequent grade levels at individual schools, can quickly change the reality on the ground – and likely will continue to do so for years to come.

Whatever the causes, the resulting enrollment growth in the last three to four years, across the district, has been significant. After “bottoming out” almost a decade earlier than had been projected back in 2007-08 – at 46,046 students in 2008-09, rather than in 2016-17 at roughly that number – PPS enrollment has now grown to 48,098 in the current (2013-14) year.

However, as in the past, this overall seemingly modest gain of 10% district-wide has varied widely in different parts of the district. At least 12 schools have experienced enrollment increases of 30% or more in the last five years. This year, enrollment strains at several schools— e.g. SW Portland’s Lincoln High School, and Beverley Cleary K-8 in NE Portland— have prompted recent meetings attended by hundreds of parents, discussing options that range from portable classrooms to large remodeling/expansion projects. (Not surprisingly, few parents have urged PPS officials to relieve over-crowding at these schools by “re-districting out” their students to nearby schools.)

Yet in other parts of PPS, particularly in diverse and lower income neighborhoods, some schools have experienced declines of 5% or even 15% in their enrollments.

Matching the proper number of students with existing facilities –many over 60 years old – isn’t easy even under relatively stable circumstances. But at the neighborhood level, the challenges posed by growing enrollment will likely further exacerbate these space limitations, forcing the district to ponder significant changes in boundary lines, facility configurations, or both.

And as unlikely as it might have seemed five years ago, there’s a distinct possibility that some closed school buildings could now be considered for re-opening. But that will provide little comfort to those whose neighborhood schools were closed just a few years ago.

Appendix 2 –Interviews

Community and PPS

1. SACET Co-Chairs and PPS staff
2. City of Portland Bureau of Planning & Sustainability
3. SACET Members
4. Our Portland Our Schools
5. SuperSAC
6. Madison Cluster PTA Network
7. Portland Parents Coalition
8. BESC Stakeholders/ Regional Administrators, Chief Academic Officer and Superintendent
9. PPS Facilities
10. City of Portland Diversity and Civic Leadership Program / Office of Neighborhood Involvement
11. Portland Council of PTAs
12. Lincoln Cluster Parents
13. Bond Advisory Committee
14. Urban League Parent Group / KairosPDX
15. All Hands Raised
16. Scott School Parent Group
17. Portland Association of Teachers
18. Latino Network
19. Coalition of the Communities of Color
20. PPS Principals Association
21. PPS Office of Equity & Partnerships

Representatives from school districts and education organizations

1. Christie, Kathy. Vice President, Knowledge/Information Management & Dissemination, Education Commission of the States
2. Crispell, Bruce. Director of Long Range Planning, Montgomery County Public Schools (MD)
3. Driscoll, Kim. Mayor, Salem, MA
4. Fair, Ryan. Director of Enrollment, Minneapolis Public Schools
5. Ives, Andrea. Director of Enrollment Services, Denver Public Schools
6. Lazarus, William. Seer Analytics
7. Libros, Tracy. Manager of Enrollment and Planning, Seattle Public Schools
8. Lowe, Jonathan. Director of Student Assignment, Jefferson County Public Schools (KY)
9. Mincberg, Cathy. Executive Director, Center for the Reform of School Systems
10. National Association of School Superintendents
11. Paulson, Mary. Chief of Staff, Salem-Keizer School District
12. Peyton, Tony. Director of Policy—Office of the Mayor, Louisville, KY
13. Posey, Lee. National Council of State Legislatures
14. Schild, Randy. Superintendent, Tillamook School District (OR)
15. Vance, Amelia. National Association of State Boards of Education

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