# Improving Graduation Rates at Portland Public Schools

A report by the District Performance Auditor
June 2013

PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PORTLAND, OREGON

**PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
501 North Dixon Street / Portland, OR 97227

Email: rctracy@pps.k12.or.us
**Richard C. Tracy**
Telephone: (503) 916-3258 District Performance Auditor

MEMORANDUM

**To:** Board of Education

**From:** Richard C. Tracy, District Performance Auditor

**Date:** June 2013

**Re:** **Improving Graduation Rates -** Performance Audit

Attached is my audit report on Improving Graduation Rates at the Portland Public School district. I performed this audit in response to the 2012-13 Performance Audit Plan approved by the School Board.

I would like to thank the District management and staff for their assistance and cooperation in conducting this audit.

I look forward to meeting with you at upcoming Board meetings to more fully discuss the report's findings and recommendations. Thank you for your ongoing support of performance auditing.

cc:
Carole Smith
Jollee Patterson

# Contents


SUMMARY ..... 1

INTRODUCTION ..... 3

- National and State focus on improving graduation rates and reducing dropouts
- Research findings: Why students drop out and fail to graduate
- PPS High School System Design: Comprehensive approach to improvement
- Audit objectives, scope, and methods

AUDIT RESULTS ..... 13

- Other large Oregon school districts outperform Portland
- Case studies: Learning from other districts
- PPS support services and interventions mirror many other districts
- What works: Exemplary programs and practices
- Need for additional information

RECOMMENDATIONS ..... 43

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO THE AUDIT ..... 45

APPENDICES

A. Literature and research on improving graduation rates ..... A-1

B. Explanation of the High School Cohort Graduation and Dropout Rates ..... B-1

# SUMMARY

A central focus of national and state school improvement efforts is the drive to increase high school graduation rates and to reduce dropouts. Research shows that high school dropouts are much more likely to be unemployed, living in poverty, and receiving public assistance. Failing to complete high school not only imperils the future of individuals but also impacts the community through the loss of productive workers and higher costs for health and social services.

Over the past five years, the Portland Public School district has pursued a number of strategies to improve student outcomes and bring more equity and stability to Portland's high schools. These efforts culminated in the School Board approval of a comprehensive reform process called the High School System Design (HSSD) in October 2010. A December 2012 status report on the implementation of the HSSD shows that the district may be seeing results from the reform effort. Overall graduation rates have improved from 53 percent to 63 percent and the graduation gap between white and Hispanic student dropped from 30 points to 19 points. In addition, while there has been little progress in reducing the percent of at-risk students entering 9$^{th}$ grade, 62 percent of 10$^{th}$ graders are now on track to graduate compared to 51 percent in 2008-09.

To further accelerate improvement, the Superintendent established a High School Action Team in early 2013 to propose additional changes in educational practice. This report provides additional information to assist decision makers in improving graduation rates and reducing dropouts. It compares PPS to other school districts in order to identify promising practices that might be useful to PPS in their quest to improve graduation rates and reduce the achievement gap.

The major findings of the audit are as follows:

- PPS is improving but lags behind other large Oregon districts in on-time graduation and dropout levels. Although PPS increased graduation rates by 10 points and lowered dropout rates by 4 points over the past four years, PPS ranks last in graduation rates and 7th in dropout rates when compared to the ten largest Oregon school districts.

- Several large Oregon districts with similar demographics and special populations are able to achieve better performance than PPS. Hillsboro School District and Salem-Keizer School District perform significantly better with special population groups with similar levels of disadvantaged and underserved ethnic populations. Beaverton School District has also performed better than PPS in increasing grad rates for students with limited English proficiency.

- School districts in Oregon and other states have implemented new practices that have contributed to significant improvements in graduation rates. Common practices include use of early warning systems to identify high risk students, special teams that provide support to at-risk students and to dropouts, and strong management and accountability models to ensure better alignment and more consistent implementation of interventions.

- Portland appears to pursue many of the same strategies that other districts use to improve graduation rates and reduce dropouts. PPS has developed information on academic priority students, implemented 9$^{th}$ grade academies, and provided various support services to help students regain credits and improve assessment scores. In addition, PPS provides a wide array of alternative school options.

- Some exemplary practices found to have a significant impact on graduation and dropout rates may also hold promise for Portland. For example, districts have improved graduation rates through expanded use of mentors and after-school programs, stronger attendance monitoring and follow-up systems, and more focus on middle-school students.

To ensure recent gains in graduation rates at PPS are maintained and improved, the district should continue existing reform efforts and consider the feasibility of other promising practices identified in this report. In addition, the district could benefit from understanding how well existing practices work, what practices students say works best for them, and how consistently established practices are implemented throughout the district.

# INTRODUCTION

Improving graduation rates and reducing dropouts are major goals at Portland Public Schools and in school districts around the nation. Portland and other districts are pursuing a variety of approaches to help students prepare for high school, career, and future schooling. This report compares PPS to nine other large districts in Oregon and offers case studies on districts that are achieving higher graduation rates and fewer dropouts. In addition, the report discusses exemplary practices from around the country that have had a positive impact on students staying in school and graduating. The case studies and exemplary practices are intended to help the district make decisions as it implements high school improvements and strives to meet PPS Milestones and the State of Oregon 40-40-20 goals which call for 100 percent high school completion by 2025.

## National and State focus on improving graduation rates and reducing dropouts

Both the federal and state government are pursuing initiatives to increase high school graduation rates and to reduce dropouts. Through the US Department of Education, the federal government is funding interventions in low performing high schools around the country designed to improve achievement and transform school culture. The government is investing in innovative dropout recovery and prevention strategies to better engage youth in their learning and to help them catch-up academically. In addition, a college pathways program provides support to states to help increase access to college-level, dual credit, and other accelerated coursed in high-schools with high-need populations. Speaking at a GradNation event in 2010 President Obama said:

> *"It's time for all of us to come together – parents and students, principals and teachers, business leaders and elected officials – to end America's dropout crisis."*

Federal regulations in 2008 required states to begin collecting data on high school graduation rates in a common and standardized manner that would allow meaningful comparisons among schools and districts around the country. The new measure – an adjusted four-year cohort graduation rate – provides more uniformity and transparency in reporting high school graduation rates, increases accountability, and helps districts develop strategies to reduce dropouts and increase graduation rates. In 2012, the federal U.S. Department of

Education released data on state four-year graduation rates for 2010-11 – the first year for which all states used and common, rigorous new measure. Figure 1 below present the provisional data on state graduation rates. As shown, the state of Oregon had a four-year 2011-12 cohort graduation rate of 68 percent, lower than most other states in the nation. See Appendix A for an explanation of the high school cohort graduation rate indicator.

In 2011, the Oregon State Legislature in response to adverse trends in high school graduation rates and educational degree attainment, passed legislation to dramatically increase school completion rates and to establish a unified educational system for students in pre-school through graduate school that would dramatically improve educational outcomes in Oregon. The plan, termed the **40-40-20 Plan,** calls by 2025 for 40 percent of adult Oregonian to complete a bachelor's degree or higher, 40 percent earning a associates degree or postsecondary credential, and the remaining 20 percent or fewer to earn a high school diploma or its equivalent. In order to achieve these goals the state is investing in education in various ways to improve early reading, provide more professional development to teachers and administrators, connect more students to work through more focus on math, technology, and science, and increase supports to help students earn a diploma and have access to post-secondary employment.

In order to measure how well Oregon is doing in graduating students, the state tracks four and five year high school graduation rates and four and five year completer rates. Graduation rates measure the number of students who receive a high school diploma within four or five years, the completer rate counts students who also receive a GED (General Equivalency Diploma also known as a General Education Diploma), a Modified Diploma, or Adult High School diploma.

In addition, in response to receiving a waiver from some of the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, the State of Oregon has established a new accountability system for Oregon school districts. One feature of this accountability model is **achievement compacts** between the state and school districts. The achievement compacts are agreements between the state and school districts that defines key measures of success and sets targets for achievement – graduation rate is one of the key measures of success established by the achievement compacts. The Portland Public Schools established achievement compact measures in 2012 with a graduation rate goal of 68 percent by 2014-15 and 100% by 2025.

## Figure 1 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates: All States by Student Demographic Categories, School Year 2010-11

**Provisional Data File: SY2010-11 Four-Year Regulatory Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates**

| | Major Racial and Ethnic Groups | | | | | | | Special Populations | | | Asian/Pacific Islander Detail[2] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | All Students | American Indian / Alaska Native or Native American | Asian / Pacific Islander[1] | Black (not Hispanic) or African American | Hispanic / Latino | Multicultural or Multiethnic or Multiracial | White (not Hispanic) or Caucasian | Children with disabilities (IDEA) | Limited English proficient (LEP) Students | Economically Disadvantaged Students | Asian | Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander or Pacific Islander |
| ALABAMA | 72% | 80% | 77% | 63% | 66% | - | 78% | 30% | 36% | 62% | - | - |
| ALASKA | 68% | 51% | *74%* | 63% | 62% | 65% | 75% | 40% | 41% | 56% | 79% | 59% |
| ARIZONA | 78% | 62% | 87% | 74% | 72% | - | 85% | 67% | 25% | 73% | - | - |
| ARKANSAS | 81% | 85% | *75%* | 73% | 77% | 82% | 84% | 75% | 76% | 75% | 80% | 51% |
| BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION | 61% | 61% | - | - | - | - | - | 56% | 51% | 61% | - | - |
| CALIFORNIA | 76% | 68% | *89%* | 63% | 70% | 65% | 85% | 59% | 60% | 70% | 90% | 74% |
| COLORADO | 74% | 52% | *81%* | 65% | 60% | - | 81% | 53% | 53% | 62% | 81% | - |
| CONNECTICUT | 83% | 72% | *92%* | 71% | 64% | - | 89% | 61% | 59% | 62% | - | - |
| DELAWARE | 78% | 78% | *90%* | 73% | 71% | 93% | 82% | 56% | 65% | 71% | ‡ | ‡ |
| DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA | 59% | ‡ | ‡ | 58% | 55% | - | 85% | 39% | 53% | 58% | ‡ | ‡ |
| FLORIDA | 71% | 70% | *86%* | 59% | 69% | - | 76% | 44% | 53% | 60% | 86% | - |
| GEORGIA | 67% | 68% | *79%* | 60% | 58% | 69% | 76% | 30% | 32% | 59% | - | - |
| HAWAII | 80% | 60% | *81%* | 77% | 79% | - | 78% | 59% | 60% | 75% | - | - |
| IDAHO | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| ILLINOIS | 84% | 78% | *92%* | 74% | 77% | 81% | 89% | 66% | 68% | 75% | 92% | 96% |
| INDIANA | 86% | 76% | *88%* | 75% | 81% | 80% | 88% | 65% | 73% | 79% | 89% | 80% |
| IOWA | 88% | 79% | *88%* | 73% | 75% | 82% | 90% | 70% | 70% | 78% | 89% | 82% |
| KANSAS | 83% | 72% | *88%* | 72% | 73% | 81% | 86% | 73% | 70% | 73% | 88% | 79% |
| KENTUCKY | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| LOUISIANA | 71% | 71% | *84%* | 64% | 70% | 80% | 77% | 29% | 43% | 64% | ‡ | ≥80% |
| MAINE | 84% | 82% | *90%* | 77% | 87% | 86% | 84% | 66% | 78% | 73% | ‡ | ‡ |
| MARYLAND | 83% | 74% | *93%* | 76% | 72% | 91% | 89% | 57% | 54% | 74% | 93% | 88% |
| MASSACHUSETTS | 83% | 76% | *88%* | 71% | 62% | 81% | 89% | 66% | 56% | 70% | 88% | 81% |
| MICHIGAN | 74% | 62% | *85%* | 57% | 63% | 69% | 80% | 52% | 62% | 63% | 87% | 52% |
| MINNESOTA | 77% | 42% | 72% | 49% | 51% | - | 84% | 56% | 52% | 58% | - | - |
| MISSISSIPPI | 75% | 76% | *89%* | 68% | 75% | - | 82% | 23% | 67% | 69% | 89% | - |
| MISSOURI | 81% | 77% | *87%* | 66% | 75% | 92% | 85% | 68% | 62% | 74% | 87% | 81% |
| MONTANA | 82% | 63% | *88%* | 81% | 78% | - | 85% | 69% | 57% | 71% | 90% | 80% |
| NEBRASKA | 86% | 64% | *83%* | 70% | 74% | - | 90% | 70% | 52% | 78% | 83% | - |
| NEVADA | 62% | 52% | *74%* | 43% | 53% | 80% | 71% | 23% | 29% | 53% | 73% | 80% |
| NEW HAMPSHIRE | 86% | 78% | *87%* | 73% | 73% | 86% | 87% | 69% | 73% | 72% | ‡ | ‡ |
| NEW JERSEY | 83% | 87% | *93%* | 69% | 73% | 84% | 90% | 73% | 68% | 71% | 93% | 88% |
| NEW MEXICO | 63% | 56% | 78% | 60% | 59% | - | 73% | 47% | 56% | 56% | - | - |
| NEW YORK | 77% | 64% | *86%* | 64% | 63% | 79% | 86% | 48% | 46% | 69% | - | - |
| NORTH CAROLINA | 78% | 70% | 87% | 72% | 69% | 77% | 83% | 57% | 48% | 71% | - | - |
| NORTH DAKOTA | 86% | 62% | *88%* | 74% | 76% | - | 90% | 67% | 61% | 76% | 88% | - |
| OHIO | 80% | 71% | 88% | 59% | 66% | 71% | 85% | 67% | 53% | 65% | - | - |
| OKLAHOMA | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| OREGON | 68% | 52% | *78%* | 54% | 58% | 73% | 70% | 42% | 52% | 61% | 79% | 69% |
| PENNSYLVANIA | 83% | 77% | 88% | 65% | 65% | 75% | 88% | 71% | 63% | 71% | - | - |
| PUERTO RICO | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| RHODE ISLAND | 77% | 66% | *75%* | 67% | 67% | 77% | 82% | 58% | 68% | 66% | 75% | 76% |
| SOUTH CAROLINA | 74% | 67% | 84% | 70% | 69% | - | 77% | 39% | 62% | 67% | - | - |
| SOUTH DAKOTA | 83% | 49% | *45%* | 73% | 73% | 87% | 88% | 84% | 82% | 86% | 84% | 63% |
| TENNESSEE | 86% | 89% | *91%* | 78% | 79% | - | 89% | 67% | 71% | 80% | 91% | 91% |
| TEXAS | 86% | 87% | *95%* | 81% | 82% | 92% | 92% | 77% | 58% | 84% | 95% | 88% |
| UTAH | 76% | 57% | *72%* | 61% | 57% | - | 80% | 59% | 45% | 65% | 72% | 69% |
| VERMONT | 87% | - | - | - | - | - | - | 69% | 82% | 77% | - | - |
| VIRGINIA | 82% | - | - | 73% | 71% | - | 86% | 47% | 55% | 70% | - | - |
| WASHINGTON | 76% | 57% | 81% | 65% | 63% | 73% | 79% | 56% | 51% | 66% | ‡ | ‡ |
| WEST VIRGINIA | 76% | ‡ | 91% | 72% | 71% | ‡ | 77% | 57% | 79% | 68% | - | - |
| WISCONSIN | 87% | 75% | 89% | 64% | 72% | - | 91% | 67% | 66% | 74% | - | - |
| WYOMING | 80% | 51% | *87%* | 58% | 74% | 77% | 82% | 57% | 62% | 66% | 91% | 73% |

[1] The Asian/Pacific Islander column represents either the value reported by the state to the Department of Education for the major racial and ethnic group "Asian/Pacific Islander" or an aggregation of values reported by the state for the major racial and ethnic groups "Asian," "Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander," and "Filipino." Values reported in the Asian/Pacific Islander column which represent the U.S. Department of Education aggregation of other values reported by the state have been presented in Italic type. (California is the only state currently using the major racial and ethnic group "Filipino.")

[2] Disaggregated reporting for Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates is done according to the provisions outlined within each state's Accountability Workbook. Accordingly, not every state uses major racial and ethnic groups which enable further disaggregation of Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) populations.

Please refer to the enclosure, "Four-Year Regulatory Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, School Year 2010-11, Provisional Release: Data Notes" for an explanation of the symbols in this chart.

## Research findings: Why students drop out and fail to graduate

A variety of factors influence the decision to drop out. A comprehensive meta-evaluation of the literature by the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University identified those factors that significantly increase the likelihood of students dropping out of school. While no single factor can accurately predict who will drop out, the accuracy of predictions increases when multiple risk factors are considered. In addition, the study indicated that dropping out is a process that compounds over time and the process of disengagement may begin before a child enters school. The study found 21 factors associated with individual students and their families that had a statistically significant impact on students leaving school early. The table below lists those significant factors.

As shown, some factors are more significant in middle school while other factors are significant in high school. For some risk factors, the study found significance in all three grade levels. Specifically, the risk of dropping out was most significant for all three grade levels for the following factors:

- School performance – low achievement, over-age for grade
- School engagement – poor attendance
- Family background – low socio-economic background

As shown in the table other significant factors included early adult responsibilities, high risk peer groups or social behavior, low expectations, student misbehavior, high family mobility, no extracurricular participation, and low family contact with schools.

In addition, research from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, the Center for the Social Organization of Schools at John Hopkins University, and the Philadelphia Education Fund identified three key factors that are highly predictive of students dropping out of school. These factors termed “the ABC’s” are as follows:

- **Attendance** – Missing 20 days or being absent 10 percent of the time
- **Behavior** – Two or more mild or more serious behavior infractions
- **Course performance** – An inability to read at grade level by the end of third grade; failure in English or math in sixth through ninth grade; a GPA of less than 2.0; two or more course failures in ninth grade; and failure to earn on-time promotion to tenth grade.

## Figure 2 Significant risk factors by school level according to a study by the National Dropout Prevention Center

| INDIVIDUAL BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS | ELEMENTARY | MIDDLE | HIGH |
|---|---|---|---|
| Disability or emotional disturbance | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Early adult responsibilities | | | |
| High work hours | | ✓ | ✓+ |
| Parenthood | | | ✓+ |
| Social attitudes, values, behavior | | | |
| High risk peer group | | ✓+ | ✓ |
| High risk social behavior | | ✓+ | ✓ |
| Highly socially active outside school | | | ✓ |
| School performance | | | |
| Low achievement | ✓+ | ✓+ | ✓+ |
| Retention/overage for grade | ✓+ | ✓+ | ✓+ |
| School engagement | | | |
| Poor attendance | ✓+ | ✓+ | ✓+ |
| Low educational expectations | | ✓+ | ✓+ |
| Lack of effort | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Low commitment | | ✓ | ✓+ |
| No extracurricular participation | | ✓ | ✓+ |
| School behavior | | | |
| Misbehavior | ✓ | ✓ | ✓+ |
| Early aggression | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Family background characteristics | | | |
| Low socioeconomic status | ✓+ | ✓+ | ✓+ |
| High family mobility | | ✓+ | |
| Low educational level of parents | ✓+ | ✓ | ✓+ |
| Not living with both natural parents | ✓+ | ✓ | ✓+ |
| Family disruption | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Family engagement/commitment to education | | | |
| Sibling dropped out | | ✓+ | ✓ |
| Low contact with school | | ✓+ | |
| Lack of conversations about school | | ✓+ | ✓ |

✓ = risk factors significant in one study ✓+ = risk factor significant in two or more studies

Source: 2007 National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University and Communities in School, Inc.

Another report issued in 2006 by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation asked for the perceptions of students who had dropped out of school. The study conducted four focus groups of 467 students who had dropped out of public high school. These students were ethnically and racially diverse, 16 to 24 years old, and from 25 different locations with high dropout rates, including large cities, suburbs, and small towns. The following are the five major reasons students said they dropped out and the percentage of students that identified the factor:

1. Classes were not interesting – 47%
2. Missed too many days and could not catch up – 43%
3. Spent time with people who were not interested in school – 42%
4. Had too much freedom and not enough rules in my life – 38%
5. Was failing in school – 35%

In addition, a high percentage of students indicated they left school because some real life events got in the way of school – 32 percent left to get a job, 26 percent became a parent, and 22 percent had to help their family.

Most of the dropouts in the focus group (51%) believed that they were responsible for dropping out of school, followed by 26 percent that said they and the school were equally responsible and 22 percent that said the school was responsible. The focus group dropouts also believed that several things could improve the chances of staying in school:

1. Opportunities for real world learning to make the classroom more relevant (internships, service learning, etc.) – 81%
2. Better teachers who keep classes interesting – 81%
3. Smaller classes with more individual instruction – 75%
4. Better communication between parents and school, get parents more involved – 71%
5. Parents make sure kids go to school every day – 71%
6. Increase supervision in school: ensure students attend classes – 70%

## PPS High School System Design: Comprehensive approach to improvement

Since 2008, the Portland Public School district has been working to improve graduation rates and to bring greater equity to Portland's high school system. A major catalyst in this effort was the 2007 study by the Portland School Foundation (now called All Hands Raised) that found that only 54 percent of students that entered high school in 9th grade graduated on time. In response to this study and other information on racial and economic inequities in the Portland high school system, the Portland School Board in 2010 resolved to develop a new framework for high schools that would bring better and more equitable results to all students. The Board directed the Superintendent to develop a plan to accomplish better outcomes by expanding access to rigorous courses, programs, and options, and by providing more personal supports to students to help them succeed.

In response to this direction, the Superintendent proposed a "High School Action Plan" that proposed significant changes to the way that high school education was organized, structured, and delivered. The Board passed several resolutions in 2010 approving the recommendations of the Superintendent to reform the high school system in Portland Public Schools. The High School System Design (HSSD) approved by the board is a comprehensive approach that involves developing a core academic program, establishing neighborhood and focus high schools in specific areas with new boundaries, closing some small schools, and creating new programs and special supports for students. The Board also established a set of performance targets for the 2014-15 school year when HSSD changes will be completely implemented for an entire cohort of high school students graduating in 2015. The HSSD performance indicators are listed below.

**Figure 3 High School System Design performance indicators**

| INDICATOR | BASELINE (2008-09) | TARGET (2014-15) |
|---|---|---|
| Graduation rates | 53% (4-year cohort) | 10 point increase (63%) |
| Reduce largest gap in grad rates | 30 points between white and Hispanic | Reduce by 10 points |
| 10th graders on track to graduate | 51% on track | 10 point increase (61%) |
| College readiness | 25% of students ready for college | 10 point increase (35%) |
| High school readiness | 30% of 9th graders are at risk | Reduce percent by 10 points |
| System-wide capture rate | 81% of students attend public school | 85% attend public school |
| Core academics at all schools | No school offering core | 100% core program in place |
| Supports for struggling students | 4 of 10 schools not offering | All schools offer supports |
| Students taking AP/IB classes | 58% of juniors/seniors taking AP/IB | Increase by 10% |
| Decrease enrollment disparity | 1,200 student enrollment disparity | Reduce disparity by 375 |
| Focus schools in demand | *n.a.* | Enrollment targets for Benson and Jefferson |
| Effective implementation of focus schools and programs | Only two schools have programs (no middle college program) | All schools have programs (middle college in Jefferson) |
| Financial effectiveness | 13.24 FTE supplement smaller schools | FTE allotments neutral |

A status reported on the implementation of the High School System Design was presented to the Board in December of 2012. The report found that after one year of implementation the district was on track to meet – or was already meeting – 9 of 12 performance indicators established by the Board. Most importantly, high school graduation rate had increased by 9 points, from 53 percent in 2009 to 62 percent in 2011. In addition, 90 percent of the core academic programs were in place in all comprehensive high schools, the enrollment disparity between comprehensive high schools was 40 percent less, and Portland Public Schools continues to attract a high percentage of school age students. The report also

noted that while the HSSD structural changes had increased equitable access to high schools and rigorous programs, more needed to be done to accelerate graduation rate gains and to close the achievement gap.

## Audit objectives, scope, and methods

The objective of this audit was to compare Portland Public Schools to other school districts in Oregon and in other states to identify promising practices that could contribute to helping PPS increase graduation rates and reduce dropouts. In addition, I identified exemplary programs in various programs around the country that have had demonstrable impact on student graduation success that might offer opportunities for replication in Portland.

To address these objectives, I interviewed PPS officials and managers, and collected data from the nine other large high school districts in Oregon – Beaverton, Bend-LaPine, Eugene, Gresham-Barlow, Hillsboro, Medford, North Clackamas, Salem-Keizer, and Tigard-Tualatin. In addition, I interviewed several officials from Hillsboro, Salem-Keizer, Beaverton, Long Beach Unified High School district in California and Seattle Public Schools. I also reviewed documents and reports from these districts and obtained information from district websites. I also conducted an extensive search for studies and academic evaluations on the topic of graduation rates and dropouts. I also obtained data on graduation rates and dropouts from the Oregon Department of Education for the years 2009 through 2012. I also obtained reports and studies produced by PPS Research and Evaluation and the office of the Chief Academic Officer.

This audit was performed in accordance with the 2012-13 Audit Plan approved by the PPS School Board. I performed the fieldwork from January 2013 through April 2013, and conducted report writing in May and June of 2013. I conducted this audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that I plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient and appropriate evidence to provide reasonable basis for finding and conclusions based on the audit objectives. I believe the evidence I obtained provides a reasonable basis for my findings and conclusions. I have implemented an internal quality control process to ensure standards are met but I have not undergone an external quality review as required by standards.

# AUDIT RESULTS

The Portland Public School district has improved graduation rates and reduced dropouts over the past four years. However, the district continues to lag behind other large districts in Oregon. Several Oregon districts with similar student demographics to Portland have seen better overall graduation rate performance particularly with student groups that have traditionally had lower graduation rates. These districts pursue a number of strategies to help students remain in school, some of which are also in place in Portland. In addition, school districts in other states pursue various practices that may hold promise if implemented in Portland. Finally, PPS could benefit from additional information on how well existing practices are implemented and producing desired results. Information from PPS students on what works best for them could also contribute to better decisions on which interventions to pursue.

## Other large Oregon school districts outperform Portland

Based on the most recent graduation statistics released by the Oregon Department of Education in January 2013, Portland Public Schools has the lowest 2011-12 cohort graduation rate of the ten largest districts in Oregon. As shown in the table below, 2,145 students from the 2008-09 ninth grade cohort of 3,400 received a regular diploma in 2012, a graduation rate of 63 percent. This compares to a high of 81 percent at Tigard-Tualatin School District and a low of 64 percent at Medford School District. The statewide average was 68 percent. The same cohort's four-year completion rate (includes adult HS diploma, modified diploma, and GED) was the third lowest of the ten largest districts and the dropout or non-enroller rate for this cohort was 15 percent, about average compared to other districts.

**Figure 4 Four-year cohort graduation rates, 2011-12: Ten Oregon school districts**

| School District | Adj. cohort ('08-09 to '11-12) | Regular HS diploma | Grad rate | Completer rate | Dropout/ non-enroller rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| State of Oregon | 46,704 | 31,962 | 68% | 75% | 15% |
| Beaverton SD | 2,979 | 2,308 | 77% | 81% | 9% |
| Bend-LaPine SD | 1,430 | 1,032 | 72% | 80% | 12% |
| Eugene SD | 1,438 | 951 | 66% | 72% | 15% |
| Gresham-Barlow SD | 1,017 | 715 | 70% | 73% | 17% |
| Hillsboro SD | 1,597 | 1,205 | 75% | 84% | 9% |
| Medford SD | 1,028 | 657 | 64% | 71% | 17% |
| North Clackamas SD | 1,502 | 1,078 | 72% | 77% | 12% |
| PORTLAND SD | 3,400 | 2,145 | 63% | 73% | 15% |
| Salem-Keizer SD | 3,112 | 2,147 | 69% | 75% | 16% |
| Tigard-Tualatin SD | 1,029 | 836 | 81% | 85% | 10% |

Source: Oregon Department of Education, 2011-12 Cohort Graduation Rates

Portland also does not compare favorably to the other large districts when comparing the graduation rates of four special groups: students from underserved ethnic groups, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, or students learning English. As shown in the table below, Portland graduated 52 percent of students from underserved ethnic groups, the lowest graduation rate for this group of students of the ten large districts. In addition, Portland graduated 56 percent of the economically disadvantaged students in the 2011-12 cohort, again the lowest percentage compared to the other large districts. Portland's

graduation rates for students with disabilities and English language learners in the 2011-12 was 31 percent and 47 percent respectively, lower than most other large districts.

Portland's performance may be partly due to the high percentage of students in the 2011-12 cohort from these special groups that traditionally have had lower graduation performance. For example, 33 percent of Portland's four-year graduation cohort were from underserved ethnic groups, higher than the statewide average of 23 percent. In addition, 52 percent of the cohort was identified as economically disadvantaged, compared to a statewide average of 51 percent. The 2011-12 Portland cohort also had a higher than average number of special education students but a lower percent of English language learners. However, as shown in the table, other schools with the same or higher percent of students from these groups, such as the Hillsboro School District and the Salem-Keizer School District, both had better graduation rates for these groups than Portland. Hillsboro graduated 67 percent and Salem-Keizer graduated 62 percent of the underserved ethnic group compared to Portland's rate of 52 percent. Hillsboro graduated 70 percent and Salem-Keizer graduated 62 percent of their economically disadvantaged students in the 2011-12 cohort compared to Portland's rate of 56 percent.

**Figure 5 2011-12 Graduation rate comparison for four special groups: Ten Oregon school districts**

| | UNDERSERVED ETHNIC GROUP* | | ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED | | STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES | | LEP** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| School District | % of students | grad. rate | % of students | grad. rate | % of students | grad. rate | % of students | grad. rate |
| State of Oregon | 23% | 58% | 51% | 68% | 14% | 38% | 9% | 49% |
| Beaverton SD | 23% | 58% | 39% | 63% | 13% | 48% | 12% | 52% |
| Bend-LaPine SD | 14% | 53% | 50% | 65% | 13% | 45% | 4% | 35% |
| Eugene SD | 16% | 57% | 41% | 55% | 15% | 39% | 3% | 44% |
| Gresham-Barlow SD | 22% | 54% | 43% | 63% | 11% | 33% | 9% | 36% |
| Hillsboro SD | 33% | 67% | 53% | 70% | 17% | 33% | 10% | 51% |
| Medford SD | 25% | 56% | 52% | 59% | 9% | 23% | 7% | 46% |
| North Clackamas SD | 16% | 63% | 43% | 67% | 12% | 36% | 12% | 63% |
| PORTLAND SD | 33% | 52% | 52% | 56% | 15% | 31% | 9% | 48% |
| Salem-Keizer SD | 36% | 62% | 60% | 62% | 13% | 39% | 12% | 48% |
| Tigard-Tualatin SD | 20% | 67% | 32% | 69% | 10% | 48% | 7% | 55% |

* Hispanic, Native American, Pacific Islander, Black

** Limited English proficiency

Source: Oregon Dept. of Education

Despite Portland's relatively poor performance compared to the other large Oregon districts, PPS has seen significant improvement over the past four years in graduation and dropout rates. As shown in the table below, over the four year period from 2008-09 to 2011-12, Portland's four-year cohort graduation rate increased 10 percentage points, from 53 percent in 2008-09 to 63 percent in 2011-12. Some of this improvement is due to corrections in the data submitted to ODE by Portland to reflect more accurate information on the number of students in the cohorts arriving and leaving the Portland district. The second highest percentage point increase (+6.2%) was achieved by the Salem-Keizer followed by 4.7 in North Clackamas and 4.3 in Medford. The Eugene School District was the only large district with a significant decline in graduation rates, dropping 12.8 points.

**Figure 6 Graduation rates: 4-year trend in ten Oregon school districts**

| School District | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 | 2011-12 | increase/ (decrease) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| State of Oregon | 66.2% | 66.4% | 67.7% | 68.4% | 2.2% |
| Beaverton SD | 74.2% | 75.8% | 76.8% | 77.5% | 3.3% |
| Bend-LaPine SD | 68.6% | 72.8% | 68.2% | 72.2% | 3.6% |
| Eugene SD | 78.9% | 70.6% | 71.2% | 66.1% | (12.8%) |
| Gresham-Barlow SD | 69.0% | 64.1% | 70.5% | 70.3% | 1.3% |
| Hillsboro SD | 75.6% | 76.5% | 78.3% | 75.4% | (0.2%) |
| Medford SD | 59.6% | 61.6% | 64.1% | 63.9% | 4.3% |
| North Clackamas SD | 67.0% | 65.4% | 65.9% | 71.8% | 4.8% |
| PORTLAND SD | 53.3% | 53.6% | 62.1%* | 63.1% | 9.8% |
| Salem-Keizer SD | 62.8% | 65.7% | 69.7% | 69.0% | 6.2% |
| Tigard-Tualatin SD | 80.9% | 81.2% | 82.5% | 81.2% | 0.3% |

*Data corrections and updates 8/12/12

Source: Oregon Department of Education

Portland Public School's dropout rate also improved over the past four years. The table below shows the percent of fall membership in all grades (9 through 12) that dropped out of high school. As shown, Portland dropout rates declined from 7.5 percent in 2008-09 to 3.4 percent in 2011-12, a 4.1 point decline in dropout percentage. While several other large districts had a lower dropout rate than Portland, Portland had the largest improvement over the past four years.

**Figure 7** Percent of fall membership in grades 9 through 12 who dropped out: 4-year trend in ten Oregon school districts

| School District | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 | 2011-12 | increase/ (decrease) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| State of Oregon | 3.4% | 3.4% | 3.3% | 3.4% | 0% |
| Beaverton SD | 2.8% | 1.7% | 1.7% | 2.5% | (0.3%) |
| Bend-LaPine SD | 2.4% | 1.6% | 2.0% | 2.0% | (0.4%) |
| Eugene SD | 1.5% | 2.4% | 2.7% | 3.6% | 2.1% |
| Gresham-Barlow SD | 4.3% | 4.0% | 4.1% | 4.1% | (0.2%) |
| Hillsboro SD | 1.9% | 2.8% | 3.7% | 3.0% | 1.1% |
| Medford SD | 3.6% | 5.6% | 4.8% | 4.2% | 0.6% |
| North Clackamas SD | 3.7% | 3.7% | 2.2% | 2.0% | (1.7%) |
| PORTLAND SD | 7.5% | 5.4% | 4.2% | 3.4% | (4.1%) |
| Salem-Keizer SD | 4.5% | 3.8% | 3.7% | 2.6% | (1.9%) |
| Tigard-Tualatin SD | 2.1% | 2.2% | 1.6% | 1.6% | (0.5%) |

NOTE: Percent of fall membership, grades 9 through 12

Source: Oregon Department of Education

## Case studies: Learning from other districts

My research identified some other school districts in Oregon and other states that have obtained higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates than PPS while serving students with similar demographics and special needs. The following pages provide a brief description of these districts and the type of services and interventions they provide to students to improve graduation performance.

## Hillsboro School District – Hillsboro, Oregon

The Hillsboro School District has a smaller student population than PPS but similar levels of students with economic disadvantages and from traditionally underserved ethnic groups. Spending is lower than Portland but Hillsboro has more English language learners and students with disabilities. In 2011-12 Hillsboro's graduation rate was 12 points higher than Portland and it's dropout rate was .4 points lower.

| | *HSD* | *PPS* |
|---|---|---|
| *Total enrollment* | *20,478* | *47,529* |
| *$/student – General Fund* | *$8,313* | *$9768* |
| *'11-'12 graduation rate* | *75%* | *63%* |
| *'11-'12 dropout rate* | *3.0%* | *3.4%* |
| *% under-served ethnic group* | *33%* | *33%* |
| *% economic disadvantaged* | *53%* | *52%* |
| *% students with disabilities* | *17%* | *15%* |
| *% English language learner* | *10%* | *9%* |
| *# of high schools* | *4* | *9* |

Factors affecting graduation rates

According to officials at Hillsboro, the primary factors affecting graduation and dropout rates are poverty, high student mobility, and poor attendance. Hillsboro has a particularly challenges working with students who are English language learners and who have a history of family mobility. In addition, the cutting of elective classes over the past few years has reduced the motivation for some student to stay in school.

Major services and interventions

HSD has developed a **point system to identify students** most at risk of dropping out. These lists are used by **Care Teams** at each high school to address the needs of individual students. The Care Teams are composed of four care coordinators assigned to high school feeder group, the school administrator, counselors, special education and ELL representatives, and individual teachers. The teams meet weekly to discuss those students showing risk behaviors such as low attendance, poor behavior, or course failure. The teams are the primary devise used at Hillsboro to contact the student, identify specific solutions to problems, and to provide specific services to improve attendance and academic performance. Services can include homework help, social services, literacy assistance, credit recovery, and alternative or optional schooling. The four care coordinators assigned to each high school and feeder schools also link students to community based social services. They know all the resources available in the community and can assist students and families in obtaining financial assistance, food stamps, or other social services. The goal of the Care Teams is to stabilize the student so that school engagement is improved and problems affecting attendance and behavior can be addressed.

Each high school is also provided **an additional position** to be used to address the unique needs of the school to help kids graduate and avoid dropping out. Schools have the flexibility to use the FTE in any way they want to help kids at risk of dropping out. Options include tutoring, homework help, on-line classes for credit recovery, and GED classes.

Use of alternative and option schools

Hillsboro focuses services at the comprehensive high schools and does not employ a wide variety of options or alternatives. The Miller Education program provides schooling for expelled students and some students are enrolled in GED and on-line credit recovery programs.

Management Model

Hillsboro uses a rigorous accountability model that includes a **one-page school improvement plan,** frequent management visits to schools, and a **mid-year academic conference** with the principal, superintendent, deputy superintendent, and executive directors to discuss strategies and results.

## Salem-Keizer School District – Salem, Oregon

The Salem-Keizer School District has a slightly smaller enrollment than PPS but a higher percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged and from under-served ethnic groups. Per student spending is lower. Salem-Keizer has a higher proportion of students who are English language learners but fewer students with identified disabilities. Salem-Keizer also granted more regular diplomas to the 2011-12 graduation cohort than PPS, graduating 69 percent versus 63 percent in Portland. The district had a 2011-12 fall membership drop-out rate from grades 9-12 of 2.6 percent compared to 3.4 percent at PPS.

| | *SKSD* | *PPS* |
|---|---|---|
| *Total enrollment* | *40,596* | *47,529* |
| *$/student – General Fund* | *$8,460* | *$9768* |
| *'11-'12 graduation rate* | *69%* | *63%* |
| *'11-'12 dropout rate* | *2.6%* | *3.4%* |
| *% under-served ethnic group* | *36%* | *33%* |
| *% economic disadvantaged* | *60%* | *52%* |
| *% students with disabilities* | *13%* | *15%* |
| *% English language learner* | *12%* | *9%* |
| *# of high schools* | *8* | *10* |

Factors affecting graduation rates

Poverty, high mobility, and language difficulties all contribute to Salem-Keizer kids not graduating from high school. In addition, the district has a very high teen pregnancy rate and teen parents have difficulty staying school.

Major services and interventions

The SKSD points to one major initiative initiated six years ago that helped reduce dropouts. The district hired three classified employees to act as **graduation coaches.** These employees, now increased to six positions, immediately contact students who have either withdrawn from school or who have very poor attendance. The coaches are young, bilingual, and energetic. Through phone calls and home visits they try to find ways to reconnect students to their original school or to find other options that will help the student re-enroll and continue earning credits toward graduation.

Graduation coaches are year-round employees and can stay connected to students during the summer. They can help students attend summer program after 8th grade but before entering 9th grade to get more prepared for high school. If students do not attend they go to students house the same day to communicate with the student and families. The graduation coaches work closely with school principals and teachers to help students return to school. According to one graduation coach, schools are more receptive to allowing students back to school after attendance and behavior issues when a graduation coach is actively involved in helping students. According to officials the key to success is establishing a personal

connection and relationship with the student to find out why the student dropped out and to find a solution such as a three-week credit recovery program, on-line courses, and special literacy programs.

The district also has a Sophomore Connections program for students that failed to earn credits in ninth grade. This program has two classrooms of students and is taught by two dual certified teachers and aims to get students "back in the hunt for a diploma". The district also runs a **Summer Transitions Program** for 200 kids that will be entering 9th grade. The students spend 5 weeks in July and August receiving reading and math instruction and career readiness experiences to prepare for the first year of high school. Graduates of this summer program have much better attendance and behavior in high school than other at risk students that did not attend the summer program.

Use of alternative schools

Salem has a **few alternative schools** that they manage including separate school sites for expelled students, teen parents, literacy center, and structured learning center for special education students. Most of these programs are intended to return students if possible to home high schools. Salem also runs their own **GED program** for students that are not succeeding at traditional school or that are too far behind in credits to graduate. Salem partners with local community college for credit completion classes.

Salem school district also works with their educational foundation to provide **mentors** for students at each high school. The foundation trains and hires mentors after a background check to help students with class, to support parents, and to provide role models. Dozens of mentors from local colleges help with student homework and with AVID strategies to encourage college and career goals.

Management Model

**Leadership** from the superintendent is the essential feature of management. A sense of urgency is communicated to principals and teachers for student success measured by better graduation rates, dropout prevention, and academic success. Leadership helps align principals around a common vision. There is a common belief that the district cannot keep placing students in alternative education.

## Beaverton School District - Beaverton, Oregon

Beaverton School District is the third largest district in Oregon with an enrollment about 4,000 less than Portland. Spending per student is significantly less, approximately $2,000 lower. Portland serves more disadvantaged and ethnically diverse students. Portland also serves a higher percentage of students with disabilities but a lower proportion of English language learners. Beaverton's graduation and dropout rates are 77 percent and 2.5 percent respectively, significantly lower than Portland rates.

| | *BSD* | *PPS* |
|---|---|---|
| *Total enrollment* | *39,054* | *47,529* |
| *$/student – General Fund* | *$7,791* | *$9768* |
| *'11-'12 graduation rate* | *77%* | *63%* |
| *'11-'12 dropout rate* | *2.5%* | *3.4%* |
| *% under-served ethnic group* | *23%* | *33%* |
| *% economic disadvantaged* | *39%* | *52%* |
| *% students with disabilities* | *13%* | *15%* |
| *% English language learner* | *12%* | *9%* |
| *# of high schools* | *5* | *10* |

Factors affecting graduation rates

Beaverton officials say that three factors keep students in school and on track to graduate: good relationships with teachers and school staff, relevant classes and school experiences, and rigorous curriculum with high expectations. Students need to be engaged at all grade levels.

Major services and interventions

The Beaverton district believes that **relevant and rigorous instruction** that engages students is the best approach for improving graduation rates and reducing dropouts. The district implements a **Standards-Based Learning** system that sets clear student targets, aligns instruction and assessment to the targets, consistently scores student learning levels, uses formative and summative assessment practices that focus on growth, regularly reports on progress, and places high value on teacher expertise.

The standards-based learning approach allows teacher to focus on parts of the class that the student struggled with so that targets related to that specific part can be addressed rather than requiring students to take the entire class over due to a failing grade. Teachers are very intentional about catching where students are behind and address those areas needing improvement. The district has used **double-dosing in math and reading** and extra classes in some subjects, but they believe these practices may be self-defeating because students may lose elective classes that motivate them and keep them engaged.

The district has also used **9th grade academies** at some high schools and **summer credit recovery** classes when funding has permitted. **Sheltered** instruction for English language learners are common practice at Beaverton as are **academic seminars for special education students** to prepare them for academic experiences.

Use of alternative and option schools

Beaverton has a number of alternative schools and high school options that are administered by the district. For example, a community school for grades 9 to 12 for students that need more support in a smaller community, early college high school in partnership with Portland Community College, and continuing education for young parents. A small school also provides education to students who have been suspended or expelled. The district has contracts with PCC for GED certification, and a Gateway to College program. According to Beaverton officials, the district does not use community based organizations to provide diploma granting education.

Management Model

Although school management is largely decentralized, Beaverton has been slowly moving to a more centralized school management structure. Management identifies what supports and activities each school is required to do but adds some flexibility for independent programs based on the needs of the school. School Improvement Plans have not traditionally been used for monitoring the progress of schools or in principal performance evaluations.

## Long Beach Unified School District – Long Beach, California

The Long Beach School District has significantly larger enrollment than PPS and serves a higher percentage of students that are economically disadvantaged and that are from traditionally under-served ethnic groups. Spending per pupil is lower than Portland. LBSD has fewer students with disabilities but more students that are English language learners. In 2011-12, LBSD graduation rate was 80 percent, 17 points higher than Portland. The one-year dropout rate for students in 9 through 12 grades is higher than in Portland – 4.0 percent versus 3.4 percent at PPS.

| | *LBUSD* | *PPS* |
|---|---|---|
| *Total enrollment* | *82,533* | *47,529* |
| *$/student – General Fund* | *$7,852* | *$9768* |
| *'11-'12 graduation rate* | *80%* | *63%* |
| *'11-'12 dropout rate* | *4.0%* | *3.4%* |
| *% under-served ethnic group* | *70%* | *33%* |
| *% economic disadvantaged* | *70%* | *52%* |
| *% students with disabilities* | *10%* | *15%* |
| *% English language learner* | *21%* | *9%* |
| *# of high schools* | *12* | *10* |

Factors affecting graduation rates

The major factors contributing to failure to graduate or to dropping out of school are low student motivation, difficult family situations, little personal connection to schools, and lack of academic success.

Major services and interventions

LBUSD pursues a wide variety of services to keep students in school and on the path to graduate. Some of the supports include:

**Career and college awareness** beginning in the upper elementary grades gives students college and career exposure that continues through high school. Coursework incorporates relevant activities so that students see stronger connection between school and the real-world. Each high school has a Pathways career education program available to students and at two themed schools that links strong academics to work-themed employment. In addition career and technical education classes are offered, as well as a regional occupational program that allows students to practice skills in work environments.

High school graduation exit exam preparation and frequent re-taking opportunities are provided at all high schools beginning in 10th grade. The district also provides support classes, Saturday prep classes, and other interventions to help students pass the exam required to graduate and receive a diploma in California. To improve graduation rates and to prepare students for other college entry classes or for technical career education courses, the district emphasizes **early algebra readiness and completion** at the middle school level. **Literacy**

**development** for students whose first language is not English involves an academic vocabulary program that focuses on key vocabulary needed for success in math, science, English, and history.

**Parent and student outreach** strive to inform parents beginning in 6th grade of the course requirements needed for eligibility to the state university system. Written notices are provided to parents beginning in 8th grade of the college course requirements and the availability of career technical education opportunities. In addition, enhanced **interventionists** visit parents of students that need extra help or that are not exhibiting normal pattern of progress. Interventionists work with students to retake high school exit exams, recover lost credits, and to improve attendance patterns. Each high school has a credit recovery program.

The district also employs AVID as an elective class for sixth to twelfth graders to help students that want to go college but lack the life skills, knowledge, or background that make college a reality. AVID provides academic support and teaches organizational skills, writing, and other skills needed in college. The district intends to incorporate AVID strategies in fourth and fifth grade.

LBUSD also initiated **College Promise** six years ago with Long Beach Community College and California State University at Long Beach to create greater opportunities for student to complete higher education. If students maintain a C average and take college preparation classes they are guaranteed enrollment at CSULB and earn tuition free semesters at LBCC. **College Promise** includes field trips to LBCC and CSULB for fourth and fifth graders, and middle-schoolers sign a pledge that sets clear expectations for what students must do to prepare for college. Over 57,000 students in middle school have signed the pledge since the program began.

Use of alternative and option schools

LBUSD has several schools that focus on credit recovery for high school students that have not performed well in traditional high settings. Students regain credits both through class attendance and proficiency based testing. The district has taken over several alternative schools because they found the option expensive and ineffective.

Management Model

The district **strategic plan** is the primary tool for ensuring schools work towards common goals. It outlines the different goals for the district and articulates what is supposed to be achieved at grade levels. In addition to frequent accountability reporting, principal and teacher evaluation and conferences, and management visits and coaching, professional development helps align efforts in a common and standard way. Officials believe that the system should work in a **coordinated fashion** from Pre-K through high schools and that high graduation rates cannot be successful without foundations in elementary and middle schools.

## Seattle Public Schools – Seattle, Washington

Seattle Public School district has a similar student enrollment and student spending level as PPS. The district serves a more ethnically diverse student population but a smaller proportion of them are economically disadvantaged in comparison to Portland. The percent of students with disabilities and are English language learners is very comparable. Seattle's 2011-12 graduation rate was 74 percent compared to 63 percent at PPS, a 11 point difference.

| | *SPS* | *PPS* |
|---|---|---|
| *Total enrollment* | *49,864* | *47,529* |
| *$/student – General Fund* | *$11,860* | *$9768* |
| *'11-'12 graduation rate* | *74%* | *63%* |
| *'11-'12 dropout rate* | *4.0%* | *3.4%* |
| *% under-served ethnic group* | *51%* | *33%* |
| *% economic disadvantaged* | *43%* | *52%* |
| *% students with disabilities* | *14%* | *15%* |
| *% English language learner* | *10%* | *9%* |
| *# of high schools* | *12* | *10* |

Factors affecting graduation rates

According to Seattle officials, the primary indicator of future graduation success is the number of credits earned by 9th grade students. Students that complete 9th grade without credits or with few credits are far more likely to dropout or fail to graduate on time than other students. Poor attendance and behavior are also associated with lower graduation rates.

Major services and interventions

Six years ago the district began a major effort to improve high school performance that involved a number of efforts to improve graduation rates. A **new strategic plan** clearly outlined goals and desired results and a set of performance indicators and desired targets were developed. The most important focus became 9th grade and interventions for students not succeeding in 9th grade. **Intervention specialists** were hired for each high school in the district to work with those students at-risk of dropping out or falling behind. Interventionists work with school principals, teachers, and parents to find ways to get students connected to school and back on track to graduate. Supports include **after-school credit retrieval classes, Saturday schools, on-line credit recovery, extended school year, 9th grade academies, double-dosing classes in math, and various reading and literacy programs.**

When students are unable to pass the state high school exit exam, the district tried other alternative methods to demonstrate proficiency including the collection of **student evidence to support mastery** of the subject matter and the use of SAT or ACT test results. The district would exhaust all possible means to demonstrate mastery of the state exit exam.

The district also changed the expectations for the **rigor of the curriculum**. All students are expected to take Advance Placement courses. One high school with a high percentage of underprivileged students was authorized to offer multiple IB courses. Students at that school all take at least one IB class. All students are expected to go to college or to pursue a career objective and to take PSAT in 9th, 10th, and 11th grade. Students also exposed to other college entrance examinations such as ACT and the career exploration component of that exam.

**Grading policies** were changed to implement a 11 point scale from the previous 5 point scale to help motivate students and to provide weighted GPA for taking advanced classes. This encouraged more students to take AP and IB courses that would prepare them better for college and career.

Use of alternative schools and options

The district **reduced the number of contracted community based organizations** that were providing educational services from twelve 6 years ago to one last year. The district found that that the programs were not successful and did not provide a sufficient level of rigor demanded by the board. Accountability for performance was hard to achieve. The district now provides many of the same services in comprehensive high schools and special district programs that were once provided by contract with other organizations.

The district runs an **interagency academy** that partners with various public agencies to help students who have dropped out, who have had long-term expulsions and suspensions, or who are part of the criminal justice system. These academies are at various sites and provide both academics and support services for social and emotional issues. One center focuses on homeless students. Some course work is on-line and some led by instructional staff.

**Middle college** is provided at three sites located on college classrooms for students taking both college level and high school classes.

Management Model

Three years ago moved from a grade level management structure to a regional framework. Five executive directors are responsible for all schools in **a regional feeder network of schools** regardless of grade level. This arrangement allows the director to work with all principals to align school objectives with overall district goals and the strategic plan. While directors should ideally supervise 8 to 9 schools, funding currently requires directors supervise up to 20 schools. The district also trained principals in the Danielson teacher dimensions framework and the **instructional leader framework** established by the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington. Executive directors work to help principals be effective in their instructional leadership responsibilities.

## PPS support services and interventions mirror many other districts

Based on my conversations with PPS management officials and review of district documents, the district has developed and implemented a number of different responses to improve graduation rates and reduce dropouts in Portland middle and high schools. Many of these actions are similar to the kinds of efforts taken by other districts. The sections below briefly highlight the major initiatives to address graduation rates currently underway at PPS.

### Major system efforts to address graduation rates

As discussed in the Introduction, the High School System Design (HSSD) is a comprehensive reform of Portland's high school system initiated in 2008 designed to increase outcomes and improve equity and stability at Portland high schools. Major accomplishments of the HSSD to date include establishing a core academic program at all high schools, closing some high school campuses, and changing the boundaries for other schools to achieve more enrollment parity. To more specifically address those students who have dropped out or who are at risk of dropping out, the district has made a number of efforts. Some of these major actions include the following:

Identification of Academic Priority students. PPS has developed a rich data base of information on students that are at risk of dropping out of high school. These students are termed Academic Priority students and generally exhibit the following characteristics: low or very low scores on state assessment tests, failing grades in core courses, excessive unauthorized absences, and are new to the district after 8$^{th}$ grade. In 2012-13, data on Academic Priority students was available for students in 6 through 8$^{th}$ grade and for students in all four high school grade levels – 9 to 12. This information is updated quarterly and is available to teachers and administrators on the district's student information system Dashboard. Schools can access the Dashboard to identify students at their schools that exhibit these at-risk features and evaluate if students are improving or worsening throughout the year.

Support classes and teams at high schools. The nine community high schools in Portland reported providing a range of support classes in 2012-13 to help students stay on track to graduate, to adjust to high school level academic requirements, and to improve math, reading, and literacy skills. Typical supports at these high schools included 9$^{th}$ grade academies, support classes in Algebra and English, the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, and various credit retrieval options.

In addition, Portland high schools have developed intervention teams designed to monitor academic priority students and to provide these students with help and advice to improve attendance and academic performance.

High School Graduation Initiative Project. A five-year federal grant funded program in the third year of operation serves students identified as academic priority at 2 high schools (Roosevelt and Franklin) and at 9 middle schools that feed to these high schools. Led by a project director and four coordinators, the initiative uses two community based organizations and two alternative schools to provide various services to students and families to keep students engaged in school and on-track to graduate. The initiative provides one-on-one services to at-risk students though counseling, home visits, homework tutoring, career guidance, and anti-violence and healthy living sessions. The program also offers after-school instructional sessions, Saturday school, and summer sessions to help students recover lost credits and pass core classes.

The initiative has reported considerable success with middle school and 9th grade students. Attendance, course completions, and skill gains in Math and Language Arts have all improved for participants. According to program officials, success with older students is more difficult. As students get older, engaging them in the program and getting them to reconnect to schools is harder to achieve.

Education options. The district offers alternative educational options to meet the academic and social needs of students that are not currently being met in traditional schools. Some students need something different from the regular curriculum and regular school hours because of they are homeless, at risk, have drug or alcohol problems, or have criminal justice or other issues. These options can be run by the district or a community based organization under contract with the district, and can be either a program in a regular district school or an independent school. Some of these optional education programs include:

- Opportunities to earn or recover credits for graduation through demonstrating proficiency, passing an exam, or for work or volunteer experiences. Options include evening classes, summer school classes, and on-line classes.
- Teen parent services provides academic and personal support to pregnant or parenting students
- Community based organizations that provide services to middle school students with academic and behavioral challenges. PPS currently contracts with two organizations to provide this service.
- Community based organizations that provide services to students to obtain a high school diploma or GED and to transition to post-secondary education. Often these students have struggled academically and/or behaviorally in traditional schools, or are too old or too far behind in credits to obtain a diploma before reaching 21. The district has contracts with 11 community based organizations to provide these services.

- Community based programs to provide services to students who have been referred by the state for residential treatment for drug, alcohol, other treatment. Two community based organizations provide this service.
- Two charter schools provide education to students to obtain a high school diploma.

Over the past two years PPS has worked to enhance the rigor and accountability of alternative schools. The district has increased the expectations for rigorous instruction in contracts with private alternative schools, begun aligning alternative school practices with the Common Core State standards, and started developing a new report card on alternative schools to improve their accountability for performance to parents, students, and the community.

Reconnection Center. Established in 2009, the purpose of the reconnection center is to reengage students who have withdrawn or dropped out of school. Students can enroll in the center for periods less than a semester with the goal of enrolling in a neighborhood high school or alternative program that best fits the need of the student. The center provides various services to help students reengage including academic assessment, transcript and credit evaluation, credit recovery through on-line courses, and educational planning for the completion of high school. Students attend the center five days a week for about 3 hours.

After-school mentoring, tutoring, and enrichment. PPS has also developed various partnerships with other government agencies and local non-profit organizations to provide various services to middle school and high school students to help them stay in school and improve academically. For example, the SUN community schools partnership with Multnomah County helps provide extended-day academic and other enrichment programs at various middle-schools and high schools. Also, the STEP UP program administered by Open Meadow Alternative Schools provides a pre-freshman year leadership camp, after-school tutoring and mentoring, and a post-freshman year summer school for students at Roosevelt, Madison, and Franklin High Schools. In addition, Self Enhancement, Inc. non-profit provides a variety of in-school, after-school, and summer school programs to at-risk African-American students.

### Current research and evaluation underway

The district is involved in multiple efforts to learn more about what delivery systems work best to help more students keep on track to graduate and to graduate on-time with a regular diploma. One study is analyzing the appropriate number, type and, location of alternative education options that are needed in order to meet the needs of students that could benefit from these programs. This study should provide some valuable information on the number and nature of students that are most at risk of dropping out so that PPS can begin identifying those strategies that would produce the best outcome for the greatest number of students. In addition, the High School Graduation Initiative Project should begin providing insights on what services work best to help at-risk students to remain in school. Promising results may offer promise for replication in the rest of the middle schools and high schools that are not benefiting from the federal grant funding. Finally, as suggested by the HSSD update report, grading practices can have a significant impact on failure rates, the loss of credits, and the eventual decision to leave school. Given the wide variability of grading practice noted in the report, more attention on ways to retain rigor while ensuring practices are fair and objective, and to find other solutions to demonstrate proficiency and mastery of subject matter.

## What works: Exemplary programs and practices

My research on dropout prevention and graduation completion programs identified a wide variety of strategies and initiatives. Some managed and implemented by school districts and others by non-profit companies, university-based education centers, and community-based organizations. The effectiveness of some of these programs is not really known and only a handful have empirical evidence that indicates the program had significant success in helping students stay, progress, and complete school. The following section discusses five different initiatives that have had demonstrated success in more than one location. They can be viewed individually but also can be combined in several ways for a more comprehensive approach to reducing dropout rates and improving high school completion.

### Focus on attendance

Research shows that chronic absenteeism (18 to 20 days a year) is directly connected to poor academic performance and dropout rates. One study found that students who were chronically absent in any school year between 8th and 12th grade were 7.5 times more likely to drop out of high school. In addition, high absence in middle school is a significant indicator that a student will drop out later. Chronic absences also contribute to lower state funding when state support is based on average daily membership calculations.

A number of schools and districts are placing renewed and heightened scrutiny on absences and taking various steps to improve attendance rates. An important precondition of a focused strategy to improve attendance is the availability of accurate and timely information on student absences. Many districts, including Portland Public Schools, have developed reporting systems that track key data associated with dropout potential such attendance, and offer this information to schools on a near real time basis.

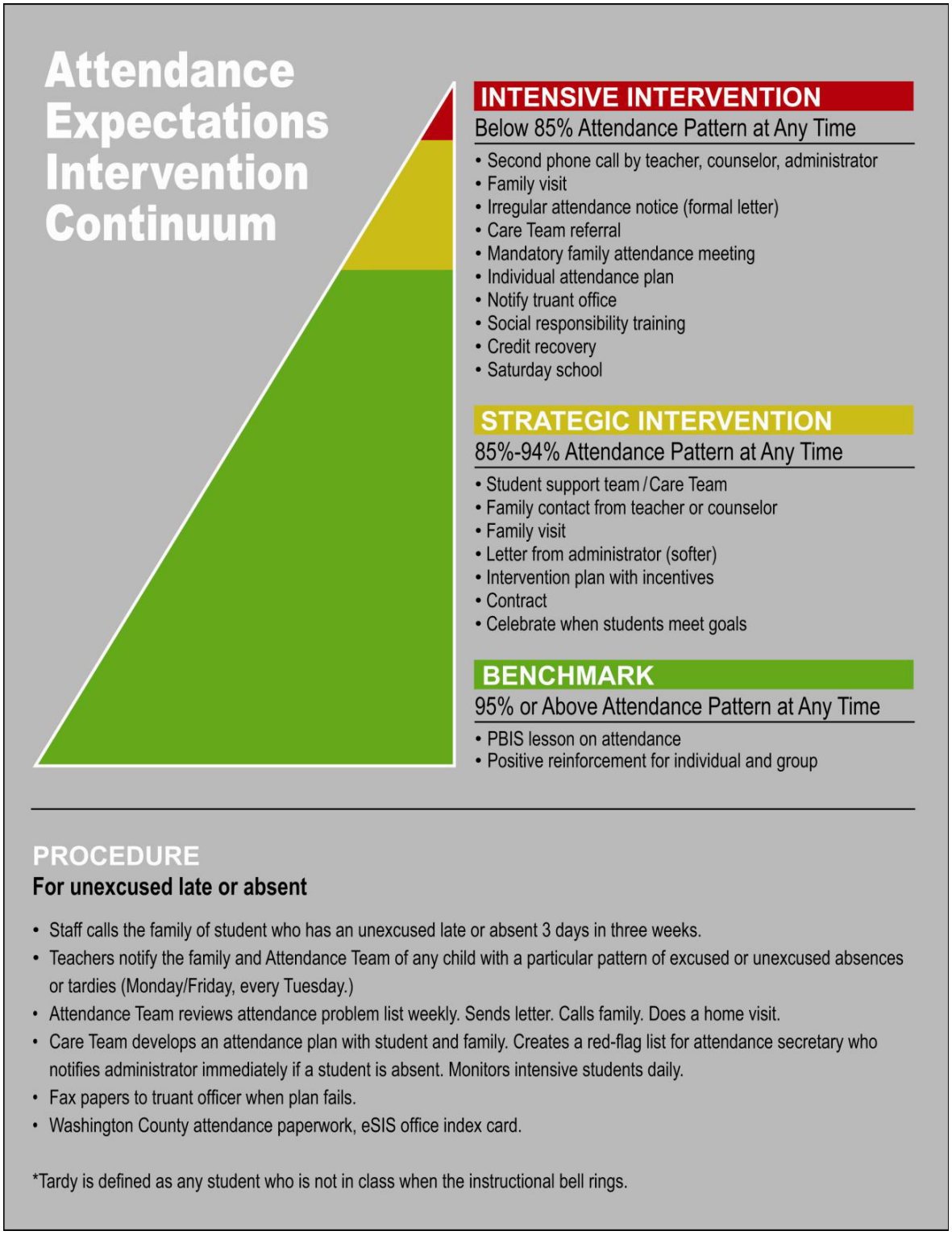
How schools use this data in a focused and rigorous way to improve student attendance varies depending on district and schools policies and practices. In one case example reported by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Roosevelt Middle School in Oakland, California was able to reduce chronic absences from 15% in 2010-11 to 8% in 2011-12, and improve the schools standardized test scores by 30 points. Strategies employed by Roosevelt Middle School included:

- Recognizing and rewarding students in assemblies for good and improved attendance
- Forming an “attendance team” composed of the attendance clerk, counselor, family liaison, graduate student intern, and the principal

- Setting a goal of 95% attendance with similar rates among all demographic groups
- Meeting every two weeks to analyze chronically absent students and to identify reasons for the absences: health, transportation, family concerns, academic issues, behavior.
- Assigning one team member to follow-up with each student and family to identify solutions to the problem
- Holding family conferences with student and family when attendance did not improve to explain expectations and sign an improvement plan
- Meeting with feeder elementary schools to identify students with chronic absenteeism to initiate actions to improve attendance before arriving at middle school

Closer to home, the Hillsboro School District has developed a comprehensive approach to improving attendance. An Attendance Manual explains why the focus on attendance is important, describes methods for improving attendance and reducing truancy in elementary and secondary schools, outlines the purpose and practices of the Care Team, and lists school and community Intervention practices and the tools used by the Attendance Team. Compared to the PPS Attendance Manual, the Hillsboro Attendance is a complete, holistic, and comprehensive approach to not only reporting on attendance but on a collaborative method for improving attendance. See the graphic below for Hillsboro's Universal Systems Triangle – Attendance Expectations and Intervention Curriculum.

Figure 8 Attendance Expectations Intervention Continuum




Source: Hillsboro School District Attendance Manual 2010

### Improving student engagement through intensive intervention

A major contributing factor in student decisions to drop out of school is the degree to which students feel engaged with school and with learning. Research has found that students are more likely to remain engaged and complete school if they feel like they belong to and share common values with the school. According to research, the majority of students who drop out are expressing a sense of alienation and disengagement, illustrated by poor attendance, behavioral problems, and unsuccessful school experiences.

A number of programs around the nation strive to improve student engagement and reduce dropout rates by implementing various intervention approaches focused on specific students that exhibit risk factors associated with eventual failure to complete school. One such program called *Check and Connect* exhibits many of the characteristics of an intensive intervention strategy and was found to have strong positive effects on staying in school and progressing in school. The central features of the *Check and Connect* program are as follows:

- Continual assessing student engagement by close and frequent monitoring of student attendance, behavioral incidents, course grades, and credits.
- Assigning a "monitor" who functions as the student's mentor and case worker
- Providing a range of interventions including structured discussions between monitor and student; problem-solving including mediation and social-skill development; academic support through homework assistance, schedule changes, and tutoring; and family outreach, with frequent contact between home and school
- Staffing monitor positions year-round with graduate students or community members with human service-related or equivalent experiences
- Overseeing monitor positions with a licensed central coordinator at the district level to ensure interventions are appropriate and grounded in research-based educational framework

According to academic literature, there are three core elements of the *Check and Connect* program that help engage students. First, building strong and trusting relationships between the monitor, the student, family, and school staff. Monitors develop a long-term commitment to a student, preferably for a minimum of two years, and are reliable and consistent advocates promoting student connections with school. Second, monitors are a persistent source of academic motivation. Consistently sending the message that "education is important for your future" so that the student understand that someone is with them during the school year, summer, and into the next year. Finally, monitors teach problem solving techniques to help students resolve conflicts and challenges constructively. Monitors hold weekly and monthly conversations with students to seek solutions to challenges and to check progress in school.

As discussed earlier in this report, the Salem-Keizer School District has implemented a program with many similarities with the *Check and Connect* program. At Salem Keizer the monitor positions are called "graduation coaches" and the positions are classified, year-round jobs and are generally staffed with young, energetic, often bi-lingual individuals. Graduation coaches are assigned to high school feeder regions and primarily work with students that have dropped out or who have chronic absenteeism and tardiness. The graduation coach I spoke with at Salem-Keizer told me that it was very important to build a trusting relationship with students and with families, and to consistently and persistently engage the student in conversations about challenges and solutions. The Salem-Keizer program places emphasis on finding a practical path for the student to re-enroll, recover credits, demonstrate proficiency, obtain a diploma or, if necessary, a GED. Students begin to recognize that you are "available to find any solution that will work for them."

### More emphasis on middle schools

In an attempt to prevent drop-outs, some schools and districts are placing more effort in middle school years before students are alienated from school life and too far behind academically to catch up. Intervening earlier than high school is thought to be an effective way to help students become engaged school before getting too far off-track. Some schools simply provide supplemental help to students in traditional middle school classes, while other schools have developed separate schools or schools within a school to provide more intensive and accelerated supports.

Research has found that the separate, more intensive approach may have more positive outcomes for at-risk students than less intensive supplement supports. Best on data from treatment groups and control groups, programs that only provide supplemental support did not seem to keep students in school, improve their attendance, or increase academic performance. However, separate schools of middle school students in smaller classrooms with more counseling and academic support were more successful in keeping students in school and accelerating their academic progress.

Two programs of separate and accelerated middle schools in Flint, Michigan, and Atlanta, Georgia demonstrated that providing more intensive support helped keep students in school and helped them advance at least half a year in grade more than students that did not participate. The specifics of the accelerated middle school program include the following:

- Students were typically one to two years behind in grade level
- Students received core academic curriculum at an accelerated pace
- Students were offered relatively few electives to make room for additional instruction

- Schools structured as separate school sites or separate schools within a school
- Classes often were linked thematically across multiple subjects and instruction was more “hands on” and experimental
- Classes were smaller and students received more tutoring, attendance monitoring, counseling, and family outreach

The research suggests that if students receive more attention and positive feedback, the sixth through eighth grade years might be important points in permanently improving student engagement in school. This belief was also expressed by officials at Salem-Keizer and Beaverton School districts. Specifically, they indicated that as student age they become less receptive to positive reinforcement and are more difficult to engage in programs designed to help them catch-up in earning credits because they might be too far behind.

In addition, Beaverton School District is also pursuing an educational approach, most significantly at the middle school level, that they hope will also prepare students better for high school and help increase graduation rates. Called Standards-Based Learning the approach attempts to develop clear learning targets in all content areas and at each grade level and build instruction, assessments, scoring, and reporting around these learning targets. Official hope that this system will provide a sounder basis for student learning, growth, proficiency for students at middle school so that they will be better prepared for high school.

### Structured mentoring and after-school programs

My research on dropout prevention strategies also identified two approaches that have shown results in helping students increase school attendance, improve behavior, and strengthen self-esteem: structured mentoring and after-school programs. Both these approaches are practiced by a number of communities around the country with positive outcomes in many cases.

According the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Science (IES), the personal and academic needs of students at risk of dropping out can be addressed though a meaningful and sustained personal relationship with a trained adult. Research has shown that students who have ongoing relationships with adults feel a greater sense of school membership, attachment, and involvement. Mentors can help students address academic, personal, and emotional needs by modeling positive and respectful behavior and offering guidance and assistance in making intelligent choices.

**Mentoring programs** may take a number of forms most typically one-on-one, adult to student relationships. Mentors can be school-based employees, social service agency staff, or volunteers working with the school or through community-based organizations. Regardless of

the structure or form of the mentor program, the National Dropout Prevention Network suggests that the mentoring program should have four key elements:

1. A clear statement of program purpose and goals
2. A recruitment and selection plan for mentors
3. A support and training program for mentors
4. A monitoring and evaluation process for the program

In carrying out a mentoring program, a panel of experts formed to develop an IES Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention, provide specific suggestions in a 2008 report. First, choose adults who are committed to investing in the student's personal and academic success. The adult must have the time and energy to multiple factors in a student's life. While teachers and counselors can act as advocates, they general lack the time for intensive support for one student. Advocates could be a resource teacher, a social worker, or a trained community volunteers. Key personal characteristics should be persistence, willingness to work cooperatively with families and school staff, and advocacy and communication skills. Second, establish a regular and sufficient time in the day or week for students to meet with adults, preferably at a school location. Third, provide training and guidance to advocates so that they are prepared to help students overcome obstacles ranging from transportation, interpersonal skills, study skills, and job or school training programs.

Both Long Beach Unified School District and Salem-Keizer School District had active mentoring programs. In Long Beach, the mentoring program is focused on middle school students and is operated in partnership with two community-based organizations. The goal of the program is to help better prepare students for success in high school and beyond. The Salem Keizer school district partners with the Salem education foundation to fund mentors at four of the six district high schools. The foundation hires and trains mentors, usually students at local colleges and universities. Mentors are young and often bilingual, and offer tutoring, homework help, advice and assistance related to job and careers, and other support and advocacy assistance.

In a number of communities, **after-school programs** are also demonstrating positive effects on student behavior, school attendance, and graduation rates. A report by the New York State After-School Network found that student participation in after-school programs is associated with improved school attendance, higher levels of student motivation and engagement, increased likelihood of high school graduation. The report found that young students are most at risk at transition from middle school to high school and benefit from meaningful academic, vocational, and recreational activities that keep them invested in their own success. The study also points to several successful programs in Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles as possible models for organizational structure, funding, and services to youth.

One model in Chicago called *After School Matters* is a non-profit organization that provides economically disadvantaged students in neighborhood areas where out-of-school time youth services are scarce. The program provides high school students with various work-based and project-based experiences through paid internships in the arts, technology, sports, communications, and other fields. The program works with schools, libraries, and parks systems to provide safe spaces for program activities, and provides paid opportunities for instructors willing to share their expertise and provide real-world activities and experiences. A University of Chicago study followed two groups of teens for four years, one group that participated in apprenticeships offered by After School Matters and a control group that did not. They found that those teens who participated in *After School Matters* were almost two and one-half times more likely to graduate than students who did not participate and higher school attendance and fewer course failures.

Another program in the City of Los Angeles operated as a non-profit corporation in the Mayor's Office in cooperation with the Los Angeles Unified School district serves high risk elementary students throughout Los Angeles. The program provides after school education, enrichment, and recreation to 28,000 students at elementary school sites. All sites provide literacy, math, science, seasonal sports, arts and crafts, and health and fitness activities, and students have input into what clubs to join and what special field strips and citywide events to attend. A study by UCLA of the impact of the program on dropout rates found that participants in the after-school activities were 20 percent less likely to drop out of school than similar students that did not attend the program.

## Need for additional information

The case studies and exemplary practices discussed in this report will provide PPS with additional information to use in making decisions regarding approaches to improving graduation rates and reducing dropouts. The district could also benefit from knowing more about how well existing programs are working and how consistently established practices are implemented throughout the district.

Specifically, obtaining more insights in the following areas would be useful to the District leadership team in evaluating additional actions to accelerate progress in achieving the goals of the HSSD:

Effectiveness of programs and approaches. Similar to other school districts, PPS is taking a variety of approaches to improve graduation rates and reduce dropouts. Several initiatives such as 9th grade academies and the High School Graduation Initiative are directly focused on helping at risk students improve attendance, stay in school, and earn credits toward graduation. Continuation or expansion of these and other initiatives may be warranted if they are having a significant impact on student engagement, attendance, and academic performance. Obtaining additional objective evidence of their effectiveness would provide useful information to decision makers.

What works for students. Learning more about what academic supports and interventions work best for students that actually receive the various supports would also provide additional insights for decision-makers. A 2009 survey of freshman academic priority students at PPS provided some interesting preliminary information on promising practices. The preliminary report prepared by the PPS Research and Evaluation identified a wide variety supports that academic priority students attended and the relative helpfulness of the activity. Research and Evaluation found that it was difficult to draw firm conclusions about which practices were most helpful due the wide variety of efforts provided at schools and the small number of students involved in each effort. Research and Evaluation recommended that additional research on potentially high payoff supports would be useful. Potentially high payoff supports for academic priority students identified in the survey included field trips, support classes, extended hours in computer labs, mentoring with adults, credit recovery, tutoring and math support, SEI, and Step Up. Additional research has not been initiated at this time.

Fidelity of implementation. The district would also benefit from understanding how consistently and completely various supports and interventions are implemented at schools. Based on my discussions with PPS officials, implementation of various supports can vary in approach and rigor. For example, how schools obtain and use information on academic priority students to initiate interventions, supports, or to engage families can vary depending on the priorities and the leadership of the school. Implementation is also affected by the

availability of funding and staffing to carry-out various supports discussed in this report. While the High School Graduation Initiative uses federal grant funding to provide more frequent and immediate contact with academic priority students with attendance, behavior, and academic problems, these resources are only available to two high schools and feeder schools, a total of twelve schools. More understanding of what works best and how leadership manages the implementation of these approaches would provide the district more information to improve programs and achieve desired outcomes.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to help accelerate progress in implementing the district High School System Design's goals of improving graduate rates and closing the achievement gap, I recommend the Superintendent take the following actions:

1. **Consider adopting the successful approaches used by other districts in the state and in the nation to engage students, reduce dropouts, and increase graduation rates.** Some of the most promising actions to consider are intensive focus on student attendance, assigning personal coaches and mentors to at risk students, a stronger focus on supports for middle school students, and building more connections to career and post-secondary education.

2. **Conduct additional research and evaluation in order to obtain more complete understanding of the impact of existing supports for at-risk students.** The district may also want to hold focus groups with students that have dropped out or who are at-risk of dropping out to determine what kind of supports or services would be most helpful in keeping them engaged in school and on-track to graduate. Finally, the district may wish to conduct additional analysis of the leadership and management model currently being used to ensure schools are implementing existing programs rigorously and in accordance with management expectations.

# MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

**PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
501 North Dixon Street / Portland, OR 97227
Telephone: (503) 916-3200 / Fax: (503) 916-3110
Mailing Address: P. O. Box 3107/97208-3107
**OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT**

**Carole Smith**
Superintendent

July 24, 2013

Dear Mr. Tracy,

Thank you for your report on improving high school graduation rates at Portland Public Schools (PPS). Your insights will play a critical role as we continue on the next phase of work to ensure that all students graduate from high school ready for college and career.

As you note, PPS has increased its graduation rates by 10 percentage points since 2010 (when our last major High School Initiative, "High School System Design" was launched). Yet, at 63%, our four year graduation rate is not where it needs to be and much work remains. Additionally, we know that while our graduation rate is vitally important, it is not the end goal. Each and every PPS student needs to be prepared for post-secondary success in college and career.

Your research highlighting the exemplar practices of other districts will be critical as we embark on meeting goals outlined in our Achievement Compacts and align to Oregon's 40-40-20 goal. (The 40-40-20 Plan, calls by 2025 for 40 percent of adult Oregonian to complete a bachelor's degree or higher, 40 percent earning an Associate's degree or postsecondary credential, and the remaining 20 percent or fewer to earn a high school diploma or its equivalent). The PPS Achievement Compact Advisory Committee has recommended the ambitious goal of all 2013-14 9$^{th}$ graders completing high school in five years.

Within our High School System Design (HSSD) implementation, we are now ready to refine existing strategies as well as focus on implementing additional high leverage strategies to accelerate success for all students.

Your report highlights several promising actions to improve graduation rates:

- Intensive focus on student attendance
- Structured mentoring and after school programs
- Improving student engagement through intensive intervention
- Focus on supports for middle grades students
- Build more connections to career and post-secondary education

You identified the practices within several school districts with graduation rates higher than PPS' including:

- Hillsboro School District
- Salem-Keizer School District
- Beaverton School District
- Long Beach Unified School District
- Seattle Public Schools

While some PPS high schools practice many of the exemplary practices you outline, we also recognize that often these strategies are not implemented at every high school on a consistent basis. Greater coherence of effective practice could accelerate our achievement results. This illuminates our need to identify successes across our system and take them to scale.

In your report, you make two over-arching recommendations:

1. **Consider adopting the successful approaches used by other districts in the state and in the nation to engage students, reduce dropouts, and increase graduation rates.** Some of the most promising actions to consider are:
    - intensive focus on student attendance
    - assigning personal coaches and mentors to at risk students
    - a stronger focus on supports for middle school students
    - and building more connections to career and post-secondary education
2. **Conduct additional research and evaluation in order to obtain more complete understanding of the impact of existing supports for at-risk students**. The district may want to hold focus groups with students who have dropped out or who are at-risk of dropping out to determine what kind of supports or services would be most helpful in keeping them engaged in school and on-track to graduate. Finally, the district may wish to conduct additional analysis of the leadership and management model currently being used to ensure schools are implementing existing programs rigorously and in accordance with management expectations.

We agree that both recommendations hold merit and should be considered for implementation.

Our next steps will include the following actions:

1. **Reinforcing the message that a high school Diploma alone is not the goal**: The focus on 40/40/20 and the clear need for our students to get a high school credential that shows they can engage and succeed at the next level are urgently important. We will maximize our opportunities to message the importance of preparing students for post-secondary success.
2. **College/Career Ready focus:** Through staff and a partnership with the citywide Parents' Coalition, we are co-designing a work plan that includes a research component related to best practices, an assessment of the current school-by-school college- and career-readiness supports, a gap analysis between best practices and current practices, the development of a Theory of Action, and the building of a system that provides every student with the ability to earn a high school diploma and be on his/her way to post-secondary success (e.g. community college, trade school, 4-year college, or workforce.)
3. **High School Action Team focus on who our high schools need to serve better**: This broad-based stakeholder committee, convened by the Chief Academic Officer, is a review and advising body that is focused on analyzing current best practice in PPS and other school systems for student retention and success, reviewing multiple segmented data studies, and making recommendations for improved practice in our system.
4. **Successful Schools Framework:** Our Office of Schools has generated a set of five essential practices all schools must employ that align with our own odds-beating schools, and those across the nation. All PPS schools will be expected to sustain or grow their practice and our professional learning for 2013-14 will focus on these areas. Those five strategies are: Professional Learning Communities, Family-School Partnerships, Effective Instruction, Responsive Assessment and Positive Behavior Support Systems.
5. **Academic Cabinet and High School Principal review of audit results for further consideration:** We will share this report with both our Central Office instructional leaders and our high school principals for further consideration of next steps. Those could include: a)

commissioning further study, b) site visit teams to gather more in depth understanding of promising practices in exemplar districts, c) other collaborations or extension of existing work in support of accelerated high school achievement.

6. **Supports for middle grade students**: PPS Central Staff will support schools in continuing to intensify their focus on academic skill growth in middle grades so students arrive on track for success in high school.

Again, we are grateful for this opportunity to learn from this audit of PPS high school graduation rate.

Sincerely,

Carole Smith
Superintendent
Portland Public Schools

# APPENDIX A

## Literature and Research


*Portland's High School System: Update on High School Systems Design and Next Steps to Accelerate Progress.* Portland Public Schools December 12, 2012.

*The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, a report by Civic Enterprises in association with Pete D. Hart Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, March 2006.

*Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs.* National Dropout Prevention Center and Communities in Schools, Inc., May 2007.

*Dropout Prevention.* What Works Clearinghouse - National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, U.S. Department of Education, NCEE 2008-4025.

*How Can We Help: Lessons from Federal Drop-out Prevention Programs.* Mathematica Policy Research Inc., September 1999.

*Graduation Counts: Redesigning the American High School.* National Governors Association, 2005.

*Coming to Terms with At-Risk.* Jay Smink from Helping Students Graduate: A Strategic Approach to Dropout Prevention, 2004

*On Track for Success: The Use of Early Warning Indicator and Intervention Systems fo Build a Grad Nation.* Civic Enterprises and the Everyone Graduates Center at John Hopkins University November 2011

*What Your Community Can Do to End its Drop-out Crisis.* Robert Balfanz, Center for Social Organization of Schools, John Hopkins University, May 2007.

*Dropout Rates in the United States:* 2000. National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education

*Regulatory Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates.* ED Data Express, U.S. Department of Education, 2011.

*High School Dropouts in America.* Alliance for Excellent Education, September 2010.

*Dropout Crisis Facts.* America's Promise Alliance, 2013.

*Pathways to Student Success: The Role of Afterschool Programs in Increasing High School Graduation Rates in New York State.* NYSAN Policy Brief, Spring 2009.

*American Cannot Afford the Stiff Price of a Dropout Nation.* Thoughts on Public Education, Silicon Valley Education Foundation, January 2012.

*Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention.* National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, Clemson University, 2013.

*Our Impact:* After School Matters, Inc. web site, 2011.

*Academic and School Behavioral Variables as Predictors of High School Graduation Among At-Risk Adolescents Enrolled in a Youth-Based Mentoring Program.* Hickman and Wright, The Journal of At-Risk Issues, Volume 16, Number 1.

*Elements and Toolkits* – Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring. National Mentoring Partnership, 1991.

*A Focus on Attendance is Key to Success.* Balfanz and Chang, National Association of Secondary School Principals, January 2013.

*City Year: Near Peers.* Attendance Works, 2010.

*Career and Technical Education's Role in Dropout Prevention and Recovery,* ACTE Issue Brief: Dropout Prevention and Recovery, Association for Career and Technical Education, June 2007.

*Facilitating Student Engagement: Lessons Learned from Check and Connect Longitudinal Studies.* Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, and Anderson, The California School Psychologist, Vol 8, 2003, California Association of School Psychologists

*Attendance Manual.* Hillsboro School District, 2009-10.

*Oakland High School.* Attendance Works, 2010.

*School Dropout – Survey of Local Programs.* US General Accounting Office, July 1987.

*Portland Public Schools Alternative Education Options: 2011 Evaluation Report.* Pacific Research and Evaluation, June 2012.

*The Fourth R – New research shows which academic indicators are the best predictors of High School graduation – and what interventions can help more kids graduate.* Mary Beth Celio and Lois Leveen for Connected by 25, June 2007.

*Dropout Early Warnings and Tipping Points: Results of the Class of 2007 Portland Public Schools Cohort Study.* Mary Beth Celio, Northwest Decision Resources June 13, 2010.

*A Segmented Analysis of High School Students in Portland Public Schools* – DRAFT – Research and Evaluation, Portland Public School District, April 2013.

# APPENDIX B

## High School Cohort Graduation Rate and Dropout Rate Calculations

### Graduation Rate

The federal government defines the *regulatory adjusted cohort graduation rate* as the percent of students from the original cohort (class) who graduated in four years with a regular high school diploma. The four-year graduation rate is calculated by dividing the number of students who receive a diploma in four years by the number of students in the original cohort adjusted by adding students who transfer into the cohort and subtracting students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or die. 2010-11 was the first year that states were required to use the regulatory cohort rate, so prior year data are not necessarily comparable to the 2010-11 rates.

Illustrated below is the calculation for a hypothetical graduation class of 2020.

$$\text{Four-year graduation rate} = \frac{\text{Number of students in the adjusted cohort who earn a regular diploma by August of 2020}}{\text{Number of first time 9th graders in 2015-16, adjusted for transfers in and out}}$$

Oregon also calculates a five-year graduation rate for those students who will take longer than four years to complete the requirements of for a high school diploma.

### Dropout Rate

Dropout data is collected in the Annual Cumulative Daily Membership (ADM) Data Collection each year at the end of the school year. This data identifies student enrollment dates and status as of the last day of enrollment for the school year. The dropout rate measures the number of students who dropped out of grades 9 through 12 between July 1 and July 30 against the number of enrolled students at the beginning of the school year. A dropout is a student who withdrew from school and did not graduate or transfer to another school that leads to graduation. Dropouts do not include students who are deceased, are being home schooled, are enrolled in an alternative school, are in juvenile detention, enrolled in a foreign exchange program, received a GED degree, or an adult high school diploma. The dropout rate is not the inverse of the cohort graduation rate defined above.