# State of the Schools Address: Continuing Forward

**Sarah Lentz, Chair, Portland Public Schools Board of Education**

Mayor Dion, City Councilors, School Board members, Superintendent Scallon, District Leaders, Union Leaders and members of the Portland community: It is my privilege to be here tonight for the fourth time, on unceded Wabanaki Land, to share the State of the Portland Public Schools.

Over these years, I have had the opportunity to see our district across multiple chapters—through periods of disruption, recovery, and renewal. I have seen how decisions made one year create momentum in the next, and how steady leadership and clear values allow progress to compound over time.

This evening, I want to frame my remarks around a simple but important idea: *continuing forward*. Progress in public education is rarely dramatic or linear. It is built over time—through sustained commitment, shared responsibility, and the willingness to keep moving forward, even when conditions, like those in our country now, are challenging.

We are operating in a national landscape where immigrants and asylees are targeted, where disabled students and LGBTQ+ youth face increasing hostility, where equity work is questioned, and where funding for education—and even basic necessities like food and heat—is under threat. These realities weigh heavily on our community.

What I have seen though, year after year, is that Portland chooses to continue forward. Rather than retreat from complexity or controversy, we have leaned into our responsibility—to students, to families, and to this community. Our district has continued forward by centering equity and belonging, by investing thoughtfully, and by holding ourselves accountable for progress, even when the work is hard and the path is not always clear.

The Portland Public Schools is the largest district in Maine, serving 6,244 Pre-K through 12th-grade students across 10 elementary, three middle, and four high schools. An additional 4,000 learners participate in Portland Adult Education programming.

We are also the most racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse school system in the state.

More than half of our students are economically disadvantaged. Nearly a third are English Language Learners. Almost one in five receive special education services, and more than 8% are identified as unhoused. Our students and families speak 61 languages, with Portuguese, Spanish, Somali, Arabic, French, and Lingala among the most common after English. About

48% of our students identify as White, 30% Black, 10% Hispanic, 7% multiracial, 4% Asian, and about ⅓ of 1% as Native American.

This diversity is our super power. It enriches learning, builds empathy, and prepares our students for life beyond high school. At the same time, it requires us to be intentional and vigilant in meeting students where they are academically, socially, and emotionally, and doing so at scale. To do this, we anchor ourselves in our values and in our five-year Strategic Plan. This plan, adopted in 2024, focuses on five priorities—**Equity, Achievement, Whole Student, People, and Systems**—all in service of one clear goal: ensuring that every student graduates prepared and empowered for future success. I'm going to pause here to share a brief video that I hope will help bring the plan to life for you and bring some of our wonderful students and educators into this room! I also want to note that in front of you, you have a set of materials that will provide additional context on the topics I'll be speaking to tonight.

[Show video]

As the video shows, this plan is not a document that sits on a shelf. Under Superintendent Ryan Scallon's steady leadership, it is actively shaping how we allocate resources, evaluate progress, and adjust course. We follow a clear cycle with this plan: invest strategically, continuously improve, measure our impact, and adjust as needed.

Now I will share highlights in each of the five areas.

## Equity

First, equity. It is not one priority among many—it is the foundation of everything we do. Our definition of equity is holding all people to high expectations and making sure they have access to opportunities that are reflective of their individual needs, identities, and experiences. Continuing forward requires us to hold that foundation steady, even as the context around us shifts.

Over the past year, we have deepened learning connected to Maine's history and people. Our Wabanaki Studies curriculum, now implemented in grades Pre-K-11, has every second-grader visiting Mayor Baxter Woods alongside Passamaquoddy educator Minquansis Sapiel—learning directly about Indigenous connections to land, history, and culture. Meanwhile, our Local Black History Advisory Group continues its work on a new curriculum that will be fully implemented by 2027. These are not symbolic gestures. They are systemic decisions that tell students and staff: *You belong here*.

Our commitment to equity also requires us to examine the systems and mindsets that shape student experiences and perpetuate inequities. This year, we have prioritized professional learning focused on culturally responsive practices, particularly in literacy instruction and school leadership. In the months ahead, all staff will receive training in active bystander intervention and de-escalation, ensuring we are prepared to support students and colleagues in the face of potential federal immigration actions or other safety concerns. We are also planning to look at our multilingual services, with the goal of strengthening and better coordinating the supports we provide to multilingual students and their families.

Equity also shows up in tangible, everyday ways. This year, PPS added Yom Kippur and Eid al-Fitr to the district calendar and expanded Halal meal options to all students, all schools, at every meal. These steps reflect our effort to honor the lived experiences of our students and staff with dignity and respect.

Our focus on equity requires leadership grounded in courage, humility, and a commitment to staying in the work even when—especially when—it is hardest. I particularly want to express my appreciation for the ways Superintendent Scallon, our Board, and the community have remained committed to speaking out in support of and actively protecting the rights of our most marginalized students—at times risking their own safety to do so. In a moment when too many leaders and districts are silent, Portland has chosen to stand up, to give testimony at the statehouse, to enter federal lawsuits—for dignity, safety, and the right of every student to learn as their full, authentic self, and we will continue to do so.

Let me be clear. We don't always get it right. We know that we still have much work ahead to achieve our vision for equity and to ensure that every student and every employee feels safe, valued, and included. Recently, we have heard feedback about areas where we aren't doing enough, specifically for staff. In a resolution passed by the Board in December, we are committing to an external review of all of our equity practices and using the results to further inform our strategic plan and investments. I am appreciative of all the staff and community members who have shared their experiences in service of moving our equity work forward.

## Achievement

Equity is woven through the rest of our strategic priorities and we see it clearly in our focus on achievement. Our goal is to ensure that all students experience rigorous, relevant, and engaging learning across every grade level.

Last year we invested in new high-quality English Language Arts curricula at the elementary and middle school levels. Our educators have embraced the learning curve of these new

curricula with professionalism and care. While meaningful academic gains do not appear overnight, we are already seeing growing confidence and consistency in classrooms across the district.

And we are beginning to see that consistency reflected in our data. Chronic absenteeism is down across all school levels. Suspensions have decreased by 10 percent. And math and reading scores have increased at every level. Importantly, reading scores have also improved for students with IEPs, for multilingual learners, and for students who are economically disadvantaged—showing that progress is reaching the students who have historically navigated the most challenges.

We also took a significant step to support learning and attention in our schools by removing cell phones from the school day. While this change required adjustment, early feedback from educators and students tells us that classrooms are calmer, students are more engaged, and learning time is better protected. This is a clear example of how continuing forward sometimes means making thoughtful, difficult decisions in service of students' long-term success.

We have also made strengthening special education services a key priority. Following an external review, we focused our efforts and investments on four areas: improving support for students with the highest needs, strengthening IEP processes, expanding targeted professional development, and deepening family engagement. Every school now has a dedicated Special Education Coordinator, and new district leadership positions are helping build the systems necessary for improved instruction and service delivery.

Separately, we have done extensive engagement to solicit input on a vision for our "High School for the Future" and submitted two funding proposals to the State Department of Education to support the building of a new high school. If we are fortunate enough to receive state funding, the establishment of a new school will be many years away and require extensive planning and community engagement.

In the meantime, though, we are continuing to work to ensure that all high school students have a robust and enriching educational experience, no matter which school they attend. This includes implementing ninth-grade academies, which provide intensive support to students during the first year of high school.

Our students, as always, give us so much to celebrate. This fall, three seniors were named National Merit Semifinalists, placing them among the top 1/2 of 1% of students nationwide. Casco Bay High School's Mock Trial team represented Maine at the national championship. Just a few weeks ago, Casco Bay High School seniors walked through frigid temperatures on

their annual College March, celebrating the fact that, again, every senior completed at least one college application.

We are proud of the many pathways PPS offers students. Portland Arts and Technology High School provides hands-on career and technical education, from a newly launched Outdoor Education and Leadership program to a nationally accredited Automotive Technology program. Other students are participating in early college programs, such as Spring Ahead, an initiative of Southern Maine Community College that allows high school students to earn credits in college-level courses. Just before the winter break, 41 Deering High School students transitioned into Spring Ahead. Those students alone will save more than $37,000 in tuition costs. And Portland Adult Education offers multiple pathways enabling students to earn high school credits or an equivalency certificate, gain valuable job skills, learn English, or participate in enrichment classes for the sheer love of learning.

## Whole Student

Academic success, however,  is inseparable from student well-being. Continuing forward means caring for students not only as learners, but as whole people, including their social-emotional development, physical health, and sense of belonging day after day, year after year.

This year, we introduced a new elementary social-emotional learning curriculum, and early feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. At the secondary level, advisory programs continue to provide students with dedicated space for relationship-building and support.

We are also grateful for a transformative $1 million anonymous gift through the Foundation for Portland Public Schools that has allowed us to expand arts and music education districtwide. Our students' creativity has been on full display lately—from performances of *Mamma Mia* and *Peter Pan* to meaningful community engagement through visual art.

In December, Portland High School art teacher José Gouveia led his students in a unique project that combined creating art with connection to community. They held an online auction of the students' artwork, raising over $800 to help Maine Needs, a local mutual aid nonprofit.

Our students also continue to shine on the athletics field.

The RamDogs Girls Swim Team claimed the Class A title for the second year in a row! And, on November 1, Portland High School freshman Nora Schmidt cruised to the Class A cross country individual title while also leading the Bulldogs to their first team championship. And the Portland High School football team won the Class A North final!

These few stories can't begin to capture the depth and breadth of all that our students are doing—in the arts, in athletics, in speech and debate, in government and civic engagement. But we are proud of them all. So very proud. And we are heartened to know that these experiences build confidence, connection, and belonging that extend far beyond the classroom.

In addition to providing comprehensive and enriching learning experiences, nurturing the whole student is also making sure the basic needs of our students are met. We offer free breakfast and lunch for all students, as well as a "super snack" for children participating in after-school programming. We partner with the Locker Project to send home bags of healthy foods to families who need it. Several of our schools also have food pantries. This year Hannaford supported Portland High School in expanding its pantry, which is now expected to serve up to 500 students and families each month. The Foundation for Portland Public Schools also supports this work. In the fall, they raised over $70,000 to support students whose families have been impacted by the changes in SNAP benefits.

Finally, we partner with Greater Portland Health to provide access to comprehensive care in our high schools and at King Middle School. And, of course, our own school nurses are there to support our students every day, serving as essential members of our school communities. The same is true of our social workers, counselors, and family engagement specialists, all of whom provide critical support to our students and families throughout the year.

## People

None of this work happens by accident. Supporting and retaining a strong, dedicated workforce is our fourth priority.

This year began with a gathering at Merrill Auditorium with the theme of **One Team, One Plan**. For the second consecutive year, our more than 1,500 PPS employees gathered to build shared purpose and alignment around our strategic plan.

We have continued to work on strengthening the systems and procedures that support recruitment, retention, professional learning, and operational support for our employees. We have made great headway—especially in building strong finance and HR teams, instituting effective payroll procedures, and cleaning up more than a decade-long backlog of issues in the retirement system together with MainePERS–all things that impact our employees' experience.

As we move forward, we will establish a common set of values that guide our shared work, building improved mechanisms for two-way communications with staff and rebuilding important systems, like those that support ongoing coaching and evaluations.

Meanwhile, our people continue to do great work. Much of it is quiet and doesn't make headlines, but it is no less important.

Sometimes, though, our people receive external recognition for their contributions. For example, this year, our social workers, counselors, and family engagement specialists were recognized statewide when PPS was named Agency of the Year by the Maine Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

Just recently, two of our team members were selected as Recognizing Inspiring School Employees (RISE) Award finalists by the Maine Department of Education: Liz Meahl, administrative assistant at Casco Bay High School, and Renee Quattrucci, head custodian at Ocean Avenue Elementary School.

Portland High School art educator Elise Pelletier was named 2025 Art Educator of the Year by the Maine Art Education Association (MAEA). Also in April, the University of Southern Maine's Walter E. Russell Chair in Philosophy and Education recognized Deering High School special educator Margaret Hoyt as an honoree because of her demonstrated passion for igniting discovery in students.

Dr. Grace Valenzuela, Executive Director of Family and Community Partnerships and a long-time advocate for education and social justice for multilingual students and families, received an Accelerating Action award from Women United Around the World, a local nonprofit serving immigrant women new to Maine.

These are just a few of the accolades our people earned recently, but we know that people across our district deserve our appreciation every day for the way they continuously show up for our students, families, and community.

## Systems

Finally, we know that strong positive outcomes depend on strong systems. Continuing forward with this priority often looks unglamorous—building clear procedures, improving operations, and getting the fundamentals right—but this is how progress is sustained, and equity cannot exist without this foundation.

This work has a very close connection to supporting our people—beginning with the basics: ensuring that every staff member is paid accurately and on time and working closely with MainePERS to make sure retirement records are correct and complete.

We are also improving operational systems—developing standard operating procedures across departments, introducing new transportation technology that enhances safety and allows families to track buses in real time, and building a clearer, more transparent, and more equity-based budget process. These efforts may not always be visible to the public, but they are essential to delivering on our promises to students, families, and staff.

## Closing

I could say so much more about the work being done across our schools. There is so much to celebrate. At the same time, the hard truth is that this work is complex and challenging—especially in this landscape. For all the great things being accomplished, sometimes the pace of change does not feel like it aligns with our sense of urgency to deliver improved outcomes for all students.

In fact, when I think about this journey that we are on together—not just as a school system, but with you, our City leaders, and our community as a whole—it strikes me that it is less like a fast, straight shot down Interstate 95 and a whole lot more like a long, slow sail across Casco Bay. Sometimes we are able to move at the speed we want, but sometimes we encounter headwinds that force us to slow down. At other times, we are able to gain momentum and move at a faster clip, with the wind at our backs. And there are days when we must respond to events beyond our control, sometimes requiring an all-hands-on-deck approach. But one thing is clear and consistent: We are headed in the right direction, and we are making significant progress.

If we stay the course—grounded in our Strategic Plan and united in purpose—we will achieve our vision of graduating every student prepared and empowered. Continuing forward means remaining committed to that vision together—through challenge, through progress, and through the steady work of building something better over time.

Thank you for your partnership, your leadership, and your support of The Portland Public Schools as we continue forward together.

I'm going to leave you with a very short video that illustrates the impact of the investments our community has made in our schools and our students.

[Show Video]