High School System Redesign

An (unauthorized) minority report by SACET member Steve Rawley

June 15, 2009

Introduction

The Superintendent's Advisory Committee on Enrollment and Transfer (SACET) was asked to study and report on the "Three Big Ideas" for high school redesign. The three models were presented in broad strokes, with no analysis to support how the models would lower dropout rates, increase graduation or narrow the achievement gap.

The SACET report took note of these shortcomings, but failed to substantially analyze specific information that was given. The committee also failed to supplement given information with readily available data.

Specifically, SACET did not examine the three proposed high school models in light of:

1. the clearly stated enrollment and transfer implications of the models,
2. the number of campuses that would likely remain open with each model, and
3. comparisons to existing high school models in the district and their successes and failures.

The committee also questioned the urgency of the process, which would seem to indicate a failure to appreciate how grossly inequitable our current system is. We don't, in fact, currently have a "system" of high schools.

This lack of a central system (along with other factors, such as the school funding formula and allowance of neighborhood-to-neighborhood transfers), has led to the statistical exclusion of poor and minority students from comprehensive secondary education in Portland Public Schools.

Therefore, it is of tantamount importance that we immediately begin implementing a system that eliminates race, income and home address as predictors of the kind of education a student receives in high school.

For the first time since massive revenue cuts in the 1990s began forcing decentralization of our school system, we are envisioning a single, district-wide model for all of our high schools. That is a remarkable and welcome step toward equity of educational opportunity in Portland Public Schools.

The focus of this minority report is on the three factors listed above: enrollment and transfer, number of campuses remaining, and comparisons to existing high schools.

The Models

Special Focus Campuses

Large campuses (1,400-1,600 students) divided into 9th and 10th grade academies and special-focus academies for 11th and 12th grades. Students in 11th and 12th grades must choose a focus option.

Enrollment and transfer implications This model would more or less keep the existing transfer and enrollment model, and depend on an "if we build it, they will come" model to draw and retain enrollment in currently under-enrolled parts of the district by focusing new construction in these areas (per Sarah Singer).

School closure implications This model would support 6-7 high school campuses, leading to the closure of 3-4.

Comparison to existing schools This model would draw on the "small schools" models that have been tried with varying degrees of success at Marshall and Roosevelt, and which have been rejected by the communities at Jefferson and Madison. It would also use the 9th and 10th grade academy model that has been successful at Cleveland.

Neighborhood High Schools and Flagship Magnets

Moderately-sized (1,100 students) comprehensive high schools in every neighborhood, with district-wide magnet options as alternatives to attending the assigned neighborhood school.

Enrollment and transfer implications This model would eliminate neighborhood-to-neighborhood transfers, as well as the problems that go with them: self-segregation; uneven enrollment, funding, and course offerings; and increased vehicle miles. School choice would still be available in the form of magnet programs.

School closure implications This model would support 10 high school campuses, requiring none to be closed.

Comparison to existing schools This model is based on the comprehensive high schools that are the most successful and are in the highest demand currently in Portland Public Schools.

Regional Flex

The closest thing to a "blow up the system" model. The district would be divided into an unspecified number of regions. Each region would have a similar network of large and small schools, with students filling out their schedules among the schools in their region.

Enrollment and transfer implications Transfer between regions would be eliminated, guaranteeing sufficient enrollment to pay for balanced academic offerings.

School closure implications Most high school campuses as we know them would be closed, in favor of a distributed campus model.

Comparison to existing schools This model would draw on both small schools and comprehensive schools currently existing in our district.

Recommendation

It is understood that these models represent extremes, and that the ultimate recommendation by the superintendent will likely contain elements of each.

That said, the Neighborhood High Schools model is the closest thing to a truly workable model. If used as the basis of the ultimate recommendation, that recommendation will stand the highest political likelihood of winning a critical mass of community support.

Specifically, the neighborhood model:

1. is responsive to high demand for strong neighborhood schools;
2. supports a broad-based, liberal arts education for all students, but does not preclude students from specializing;
3. balances enrollment district-wide, providing equity of opportunity in a budget-neutral way;
4. preserves school choice, but not in a way that harms neighborhood schools;
5. reduces ethnic and socio-economic segregation by reducing self-segregation;
6. takes a proven, popular model (comprehensive high schools) and replicates it district-wide, rather than destroying that model in favor of an experimental model (small schools) that has seen limited success in Portland (and significant failures);
7. preserves the largest number of high school campuses;
8. involves the smallest amount of change from the current system, causing minimal disruption in schools that are currently in high demand;
9. is amenable to any kind of teaching and learning, including the 9th and 10th grade academies and small learning communities; and
10. preserves room to grow as enrollment grows.

This system is very similar to the K-12 system in Beaverton, which has a very strong system of choice without neighborhood-to-neighborhood transfers.

The transfer and enrollment aspect of this model is its most compelling feature.

We have learned definitively that when we allow the level of choice we currently have, patterns of self-segregation emerge. When aggravated by the school funding formula and a decentralized system, gross inequities have emerged in our schools, predictable by race, income, and address. These factors have also led to a gross distortion in the geographic distribution of our educational investment.

Clearly, in the tension between neighborhood schools and choice, neighborhood schools have been on the losing end. A high school model that includes neighborhood-based enrollment is a step toward rectifying this imbalance.

We've also learned (through transfer requests) that our comprehensive high schools are the most popular schools in the district.

As we have experimented over the years with non-comprehensive models for some of our high schools, the remaining comprehensive schools have been both academically successful and overwhelmingly popular. The small schools model, while it has much to recommend, has been implemented in a way that constrains students in narrow academic disciplines, flying in the face of the notion of a broad-based liberal arts education.

There is certainly nothing wrong with small learning communities, but a system that requires

students to choose (and stick with) a specialty in 9th or 11th grade is unnecessarily constraining.

A comprehensive high school can contain any number of smaller communities, including 9th and 10th grade academies. Students may be assigned to communities based on academic specialty, but that shouldn't preclude them from taking classes outside of that specialty.

This model clearly does not do everything – our district will remain segregated by class and race. But it would move in the right direction by eliminating self-segregation and beginning to fully fund comprehensive secondary education in poor and minority neighborhoods.

The enrollment and transfer policy could be further tweaked to help reduce racial and socio-economic isolation, as well as to alleviate community distrust that the reduced transfers will lead to poor and minority students being "trapped" in sub-par schools.

To this end, neighborhood-to-neighborhood transfers could be allowed, so long as they do not worsen socio-economic isolation. In other words, a student who qualifies for free or reduced lunch would be allowed to transfer to a non-Title I school, and a student who doesn't qualify for free or reduced lunch would be able to transfer to a Title I school. This is a form of voluntary desegregation that is allowable under recent Supreme Court rulings.

Conclusion

All of these models show creative thinking, and, most importantly, a strategic vision to offer all students the same kinds of opportunities, regardless of their address, class, or race. The importance of this factor cannot be overstated.

While none of the models specifically addresses the teaching and learning or community-based supports that are necessary to close the achievement gap and increase graduation rates, they all would attempt to close the opportunity gap.

But only the neighborhood model hits the right notes to make it politically feasible and educationally successful: strong, equitable, balanced, neighborhood-based, comprehensive schools, preserving and replicating our most popular, most successful existing high school model, and keeping the largest number of campuses open. The choice is clear.