



Equity Funding has not closed the racial achievement gap in Portland Schools

By Ethan Rohrbach
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Non-white students have historically performed worse in Portland schools than white students. Knowing this, Portland Public Schools (PPS) announced in 2011 that:

Closing this achievement gap while raising achievement for all students is the top priority of the Board of Education, the Superintendent and all district staff. Race must cease to be a predictor of student achievement and success.

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With this policy adoption, the District intended to spend more in schools where academic
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The primary purpose of the extra money would be to hire additional fulltime equivalent (FTE)
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teachers to address racial disparities.

The Racial Educational Equity Policy introduced in 2011 required the Superintendent to
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Action Plan for each school was presented as a continuum of steps, and each school checked
annually where it fell along the continuum SFRRO VWDII ZHUH WR VHH WKDW ³
and form an equity team WR ³HQJDJH LQ VWUXFWXUH GLDORJXH DERX

The action plan is third in a series of paperwork, collectively called a School Improvement Plan (SIP), annually assigned to each school. The SIP should thus ensure that the needs of all students, especially Black and Native American students, are met. According to Dr. Renard Adams, the Director of the Office for Research, Assessment, and Accountability at PPS:

School based leaders are required to align their use of Equity FTE with school improvement plans or district goals. The use of funds is examined in accordance with the school based theory of action outlined in the school improvement plan.

In the 2013



At the recommendation of Superintendent Carole Smith and the Board of Directors, certain K-8 schools would qualify for a maximum of 8% FTE in Equity financing—4% if at least 45% of their students were Historically Underserved, and another 4% if at least 30% qualified for free or reduced-price lunches.

To count as “historically underserved,” a student must be registered in the District as Black, Latino, Native American, or Pacific Islander; qualify for Special Education services; qualify for free or reduced-price meals through the Direct Certification platform, which means a low socio-economic status; or qualify for English as a Second Language (ESL) services.

In 2016-17, with new reports that “fewer students...meet the economic disadvantage criterion,” the floor to qualify for Historically Underserved FTE (half of Equity FTE) was reduced to 15% of students and the floor for Socio-Economic Status to 40%. Totals in General Fund Equity were kept at 8% of the district’s General Fund, which remains so today. The goal was to expand resources to more needy schools and non-white students.⁹

The Community Budget Review Committee (CBRC), whose members are elected to three-year terms on a rolling basis, welcomed this action as “an important down payment on the promise of the new Racial Educational Equity Policy.”¹⁰

The Lens is intended to give Equity FTE more substance. While primarily a goals-based system for ensuring students' neibdse1ttog sT3.9-3 (h)-4 (e L)-3 (en)-4 (s)]TJ0 13.83]TJ7.62 0 Td()TJ-0.004 Tc 0[[(T)-

students must reach 51% proficiency in reading and math, and 56% of students of color must demonstrate some degree of college readiness.¹⁹

As of 2024, none of these goals have been fully met.

Meanwhile, CBRC members continued to question the imprecise “linkage” between PPS’s strategies and goals related to equity funding. Some members worried about a culture in PPS that has big and broad goals yet fails to guarantee adequate resources in a resource-constrained environment. Where money is allocated with respect to goals is unclear.²⁰ As one member noted in a 2020 meeting,

There has never really been a way for the district to quantify those [four] goals.... It is really hard without being directed to the numbers to be able to see how the district is crafting a budget that is going to achieve these goals.... At the same time, this is a budget for a district that doesn’t exist [because of the shutdown].²¹

The PPS Board of Directors also submitted queries to PPS staff in a series of email threads which were aggregated on the PPS website. Some queries in these threads are notable because they were never answered. For example, a Board member requested retention data for black

plan, to target 23 Focus schools.²⁴ Approximately \$7,192,000 of this money went toward projects that explicitly referenced equity, like ethnic studies curriculum, “hate-related crisis response” systems for teachers and counselors, and “culturally-responsive Physical Education curriculum.”

This did not include more than \$2 million for 27 new instructional specialists for needy schools and over \$3 million for 43 new social workers. The bulk of funds, however, were directed toward “RESJ contracts with culturally-specific organizations.” The specific identities of these organizations are unknown, though PPS currently contracts with the Black Parent Initiative (BPI), Horizons Counseling, a “wraparound service” provider for African Americans in Self Enhancement, Inc. (SEI), and the Urban League of Portland, among other nonprofits.

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programming, counter to many previous district claims.³⁴ If true, using Equity FTE in this manner suggests that the fund is not even needed as a separate mechanism to apportion materials to specific schools. In other words, there is a prescription for which schools ought to receive funds, but not for where in these schools funds should consistently go.³⁵

Third, the district does not have enough transparency to demonstrate whether any relevant investments are beneficial. While the RESJ Lens serves as a guide for Equity FTE payments, it does not successfully encourage employee retention, balance discipline rates for white and non-white students, or diminish any other problems historically linked to racial inequities. Today, current systemic biases are given as the main reason why non-white students are not on par, which is precisely what the RESJ Lens aims to eliminate.³⁶

PPS has been able to celebrate certain student outcomes including, notably, the percentage of those who graduate on time. Graduation rates for 4-year cohorts comprising all racial subgroups in the district have made strong year-over-year improvements. In 2009-10, for example, the graduation rate for Historically Underserved students was 46% and the completion rate was 58%. By 2014-15, graduation rates had improved to 66% and the completion rate was 68%. By 2021-22, the graduation rate and participation rates each improved to 76%.

Similarly, graduation rates for white students rose from 65% in 2009-10, to 77% in 2014-15, to 90% in 2021-22, with corresponding improvements in completion rates. Importantly, these improvements span three different superintendents and several administrations in Research, Assessment, and Accountability.

However, the gap between graduation rates in both subgroups narrowed just 5 percent from the 2009-10 school year to the 2021-22 school year: white students enjoyed a 25% increase whereas non-white students enjoyed an increase of 30%. As of 2021-22, white students were still 24% more likely to graduate in four years than non-white students.³⁷

Clearly, the gap problem is a tougher challenge than raising graduation rates themselves.

Attempts at improving exclusionary discipline through General Fund Equity have not yielded success, either. As of the 2021-22 school year, non-white students classified as Historically Underserved are about three times more likely to be expelled or suspended out of school than white students; black and Native American students are about five times more likely to be so.³⁸

These disparities are especially pronounced in Jefferson High School, Leodis V. McDaniel High School, Harriet Tubman Middle School, Jackson Middle School, and Sabin Elementary, which all receive General Fund Equity money. This is not an improvement from previous years.

In its most recent contract with the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT), the District appears to have given up completely. According to Article 9,

Student behavior is an expression of unmet needs, and makes sense when put in context. The disciplinary response process should be aimed at meeting these needs and create an environment that helps students find new ways to meet their needs. With this belief PPS will begin to move from exclusionary discipline to Restorative Practices for all Pre-K to 12 grades.

Abolishing exclusionary discipline may eliminate the racial discipline gap, but it will not

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⁴ Portland Public Schools, “Theory of Action” (January 24, 2019), https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/4/Theory_of_Action.pdf. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

⁵ Renard Adams, Outlook email to author, August 7, 2023.

⁶ Portland Public Schools, *2013-14 Annual Budget* (June 17, 2013), 7, 41, https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/52/Finance%20Administration/Budget/2013_14_Annual_Budget.pdf. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

⁷ Portland Public Schools, *2012-13 Annual Budget* (June 25, 2012), 9, https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/52/Finance%20Administration/Budget/2012_13_Annual_Budget.pdf. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

⁸ There is and was no explicit mention of any prescribed rate by which these FTEs are negotiated, though school size and the extent to which principals lobby for non-formula FTE are probably determinative.

⁹ Portland Public Schools, *2015-16 Annual Budget* (June 23, 2015), 36, https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/214/201516_PPS_Adopted_Budget.pdf. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

¹⁰ Community Budget Review Committee, *Budget Review of the 2013/14 Budget in 2013-14 Annual Budget, Portland Public Schools* (June 17, 2013), 15, https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/52/Finance%20Administration/Budget/2013_14_Annual_Budget.pdf. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

¹¹ Portland Public Schools School Board, “Portland Public Schools 2016-17 Budget Proposal,” *Portland Public Schools* (March 29, 2016), 51, <https://www.pps.net/cms/lib8/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/214/2016-17%20Budget%20Proposal%20March%2029%20FINAL%20.pdf>. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

¹² Community Budget Review Committee, *Budget Review of the 2016-17 Budget in 2016-17 Annual Budget, Portland Public Schools* (March 29, 2016), 6, 7, https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/214/16_17_Adopted_Budget_Online_Version.pdf. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

¹³ Community Budget Review Committee, “2019-20 Budget Questions to Board” in *New 2019-20 Staffing Priorities and Budget Plan, Portland Public Schools* (March 4, 2019), 17, <https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/219/3-19%20Final%20Packet.pdf>. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

¹⁴ Renard Adams, Outlook email to author, August 7, 2023.

¹⁵ Dani Ledezma, “The Racial Equity and Social Justice Lens,” July 2, 2021, PowerPoint presentation, MP4, 24:06,

<https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/51/Ladder%20of%20Inference.mp4>. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

¹⁶ Wendy Ake, Stephen Menendian, and John Powell, “Targeted Universalism: Policy and Practice,” *Othering and Belonging Institute* (May 1, 2019), 5, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/2022-12/Targeted%20Universalism%20Primer.pdf>. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

¹⁷ Kip Memmott and Dennis Richardson, “ODE and PPS Must Do More to Monitor Spending and Address Systemic Obstacles to Student Performance, Particularly at Struggling Schools,” *Oregon Department of Education* (January 1, 2019), 37, <https://sos.oregon.gov/audits/Documents/2019-01.pdf>. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

¹⁸ Portland Public Schools School Board, “Superintendent’s 2020-21 Proposed Budget” (June 8, 2020), <https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/214/2020-21%20Budget%20Town%20Hall%2006-08-20.pdf>. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

¹⁹ Portland Public Schools, *2019-20 Annual Budget* (July 1, 2020), 19-20, <https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/214/2021%20Budget%20Document%20Vol.%201.pdf>. Retrieved August 8, 2023.

²⁰ PPS Communications, PPS

³⁶ PPS Communications, “Portland Public Schools’ Community Budget Review Committee - 4/27/23,” YouTube, April 27, 2023,

⁴⁵ Oregon Department of Education, *2021-22 ESSA District Accountability Details Report: Portland SD 1J* (October 20, 2022), <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/reportcards/Pages/Accountability-Details.aspx>. Retrieved August 1r 2023.

⁴⁶ See the four goals confirmed by PPS on page 5.

⁴⁷ Portland Public Schools, “Jefferson Modernization 2020 Bond” (May 10, 2023), <https://www.pps.net/jeffersonbond>. Retrieved August 1r 2023.

⁴⁸ Portland Public Schools, *2023-24 School Reports* (July 1r 2023), <https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/214/2023-24%20Proposed%20Budget%20-%20Volume%202.pdf>. Retrieved August 1r 2023.

⁴⁹ Since 2007, Portland Public Schools has openly accepted critical race theory (CRT), which assumes that systemic racism, largely from white people, determines the lives of entire racial blocs.

⁵⁰ Portland Public Schools, *Enrollment Sum4* (~~Sum21 0 Td[l)2 (h) (2h9y2 e) (P (n)e) g TJ0(l)T)c4 (2p0002 TS~~