



Leaving Most Children Behind:



Thirty Years of Education Reform at Jefferson

April 2006
By Matt Evans

CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

813 SW Alder Street, Suite 450

Portland, Oregon 97205

p: (503) 242-0900 • f: (503) 242-3822

info@cascadepolicy.org

www.cascadepolicy.org

Leaving Most Children Behind: Thirty Years of Education Reform at Jefferson

April, 2006

Introduction



In January, 2006, the Portland School Board voted to “reorder” the Jefferson Cluster, calling for reforms that included the elimination of middle schools and single-sex education options for grades 7-12.¹ Community members were invited to participate in the re-design process along side of the district employees and leaders who were responsible for creating the current state of affairs within the Jefferson Cluster.

As a result, none of the proposals fundamentally change who is in control of delivering public education within the neighborhoods of concern. The same school district leaders, teachers, and principals who ran the schools that community leaders were unsatisfied with will be in charge of implementing the “reorganization.”

Seven days later Portland Public School officials announced they would crack down on parents who lie about where they live in order to enroll their child in a more desirable school.²

Over the past thirty years, thousands of young men and women have passed through Thomas Jefferson High School³ in the Portland Public School District. The majority of these (in some years as many as 85 percent) have been handed their high school diploma without being able to read, write or do math at a high school level. Thousands of Jefferson graduates have left high school without the skills necessary to compete in, or contribute to, the Oregon economy.

In 1974, Portland Public Schools (PPS) commissioned a study to determine what was wrong with Jefferson High School. Jefferson, located in an area of town that has predominantly minority residents, had been a chronic low achiever. “The Jefferson Study” found the school had low academic performance, awful attendance rates and poor parent support.

During the 30 years following publication of “The Jefferson Study,” school district leadership, teachers, principals, and community members have all lamented the situation at Jefferson and suggested and/or

implemented various reforms to try to solve the problem of low academic performance at the school. More than a generation of Portland young people have been used as guinea pigs for these reform efforts with no improvement in academic performance, and little hope that the future will show any. In the 2003-04 school year, for instance, 68 percent of Jefferson 10th graders failed the state's reading test, and 78 percent failed the math test.⁴ Although the tests and teaching methods have changed over the years, these numbers have been virtually the same for three decades.

Jefferson and its “feeder schools” are referred to in this report as the “Jefferson Cluster.” The Jefferson Cluster is Jefferson High and the middle and elementary schools which produce the students who will ultimately attend Jefferson. The middle and elementary schools have shown better, but ultimately unacceptable, student performance. In fact, data shows that, on average, the longer a student remains in the Jefferson Cluster the worse his or her achievement results will be.

Community support for the school is uneven, leading to a repeating cycle. Reports of low academic performance will typically bring out community groups who threaten (or implement) a boycott to force District action on a list of concerns. The District will respond by saying it is very concerned about academic performance at Jefferson, blame most problems on students' homes, and claim that it is already implementing most of what the community is asking. After a few public meetings and news articles, things quiet down until the next time low academic performance becomes a public issue. Community newspapers publish few articles about the school, except when controversy is at its zenith. Occasionally they will congratulate a student or the Jefferson Dancers for their accomplishments.

The Jefferson Cluster is a case study of problems facing urban, minority-population schools: seemingly constant changes in school leadership; the lack of commitment from students, parents, and the community at large; a willingness to try some new, often unproven reform every few years, and; the District's inability to focus on solving the academic achievement puzzle. All this adds up to thousands of young people - the majority of Jefferson graduates over more than 30 years - who are left behind.

Leaving Most Children Behind: Thirty Years of Education Reform at Jefferson

By Matt Evans

Jefferson High Principal Larry Dashiell stood on the steps of the Northeast Portland school in May of 2005. Dashiell - the sixth Principal at Jefferson in seven years - watched as students and community members marched in a circle to protest proposed staff cuts. Dashiell and the marchers believed the cuts would mean that an education reform effort in which the school population was broken up into small “academies” to help increase student performance would be emasculated. “We’ve made great progress in creating our small school,” Dashiell said. “We spent years moving in the direction we were moving in and building the framework for the model that we had. Without these funds it’s difficult to implement.”⁴

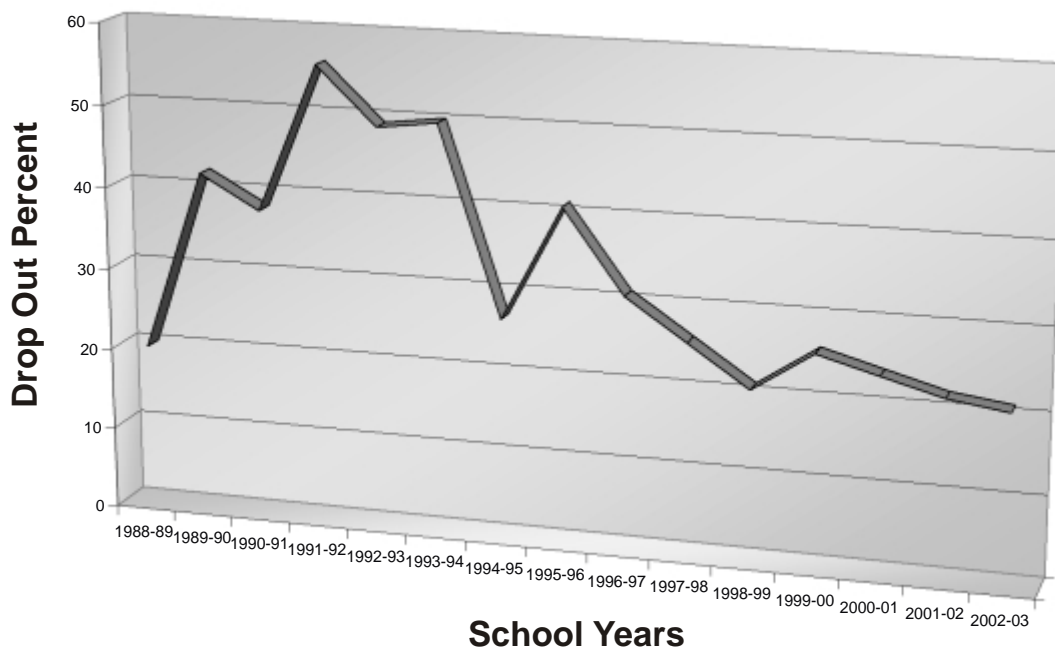
By walking in a circle, the marchers served as a metaphor for the problems at Jefferson High. Dashiell’s lament about the loss of support for the reform effort and the sign-wielding community members could just as easily have been expressing their frustration at Jefferson in 1995, 1985, 1975 or any of the years in between. During that time Jefferson and its feeder middle and elementary schools have implemented numerous efforts at reforming the way education services are delivered.

The reforms run the gamut from curriculum changes to the firing of entire staffs. But nothing, not the reforms, not the boycotts, not even the “new, new math” has worked to solve the chief problem at these schools: an education culture that produces some of the lowest achieving students in the history of Oregon public education.

For decades, Jefferson High School and its feeder schools (the “Jefferson Cluster”) have presented significant problems for the Portland Public School District. The area is among the lowest-income sections of the District and also has a high percentage of minority students. Student performance on state and other standardized tests has consistently lagged behind state and District averages. Despite reform efforts the “achievement gap” between low-income and minority students and white and higher-income students elsewhere in the District has persisted. This report will discuss these reforms and provide information about test scores in the Jefferson Cluster. Only with the proper understanding of Jefferson’s reform history can the community begin an honest discussion of how to improve low-income and minority student performance.

Graph #1

Jefferson High School 4-year Dropout Rates⁵



Source: Oregon Department of Education, *Dropout Rates in Oregon High Schools, State Summary Report*, 1989-90 through 2002-03 inclusive. Note: students may leave school for a variety of reasons. Some will move to other schools in Portland, Oregon or another state. Some will never return to school. Jefferson’s four-year dropout rate increased dramatically during the late 1980s and early 1990s to the point where 500 students might dropout over a four-year period. The method for calculating what constituted a dropout was changed in the mid-1990s, bringing the rate back down again. Nevertheless, approximately 125 students still leave Jefferson over a four-year period.

Jefferson: Some Background

For those who have no children at Jefferson High, the school is probably best known for three things - the “Jefferson Dancers,” chronic low achievement, and outstanding basketball teams. The Jefferson Dancers, who have been internationally renowned for years, are part of the school district’s original effort to integrate the Northeast Portland school.

Jefferson had as many as 2,000 students in the mid-20th century, but enrollment has fallen hard in recent years to below 800 students. This is due in part to the huge drop-out rate at the school (see graph #1, previous page). On average, as many as 25 percent of the incoming 9th graders at Jefferson have left the school by the time their class graduates. These students, of course, are not

“In example after example, the District or an individual school or principal would adopt a reform, only to see the effort abandoned in a few years.”

counted in achievement results but are certainly among those who are left behind. As the chart above shows, dropout rates have varied widely and have settled into a 4-year range of between 20 and 30 percent for each graduating class. However, the State changed the way it calculated what constituted a dropout in the late 1990s, which may account for the rate coming down to this level.

The school’s diversity has also dropped, with minority students making up 52.5 percent of the student body in 1982, but 64 percent in 1989 and 81 percent in 1999.

Thirty Years of Low Achievement

The first public acknowledgment of academic trouble at Jefferson High may have come with the publication of “The Jefferson Study” in 1974.⁶ The study found low academic performance, awful attendance rates and poor parent support. These problems were combined with the need to reduce the overwhelming concentration of students of color in the Jefferson Cluster. In response, Portland Public Schools implemented a forced busing scheme known as the “Newman Plan.” It also attempted to re-create Jefferson as an “Arts Magnet” school. These were the first two major reform efforts to follow “The Jefferson Study.”

The Newman Plan sent virtually every minority child from the Jefferson area to other, mostly white, schools

around the District while busing white children to Jefferson. It was adopted in 1977. This reform proved to be so unpopular the District abandoned it the next year. While not particularly surprising, the busing plan’s treatment would prove to be a harbinger of the District’s lack of support for future reforms.

In example after example, the District or an individual school or principal would adopt a reform, only to see the effort abandoned in a few years. This is caused in many cases by the lack of consistency in leadership. The offices of Jefferson High’s principal and the District Superintendent have been revolving doors in recent years. At one point, Jefferson had four principals in as many years and the District has had five superintendents in the past decade.

Reform: Magnet Schools

The idea behind Magnet Schools is to provide specialized educational programs at schools in an effort to accomplish several things, including integration. Under this plan Jefferson High became an “Arts Magnet” in 1974. The hope was that white students from other parts of Portland would want to transfer to Jefferson due to their interest in dance, theatre, television production and other subjects in the arts. While some of these subjects would still be available at other high schools, Jefferson received additional funding to support a more active program than available elsewhere. An assumed ancillary benefit was that the incoming white students would do better on standardized tests and therefore raise Jefferson’s average, although this was not the primary focus of the Arts Magnet program.

For many years, the Arts Magnet at Jefferson succeeded in creating an outstanding arts program. The Jefferson Dancers in particular became well known nationally and internationally. However, the idea had little impact in two other areas: academic performance and diversity. In fact, test scores were largely unchanged or worse, and the school was less racially diverse in 1999 than in 1980, with 81 percent of the student body coming from minority populations at the end of the 20th Century.



The Jefferson Dancers perform on Millennium Stage at The Kennedy Center, April 11, 2001.

As smaller annual budget increases became the rule for schools after 1990, the program was squeezed financially and lost some of its funding and declined as a result. However, the Arts Magnet program is clearly the longest-lasting reform attempt at Jefferson.

Jefferson also tried other Magnet programs, including a Biotechnology Magnet which began in 1995. Relying on a \$4.2 million federal grant, the District created the biotechnology focus at Jefferson, the Ecosystem Research Institute at Whitaker Middle School and a laboratory science model at Tubman Middle School.

The program at Jefferson was intended to eventually reach a total of 100 students at each grade level, and would place interested students in advanced math, chemistry and foreign language classes. It also aimed to place students in science-based internships and sought experts from Oregon Health Sciences University to provide lectures. The Biotechnology Magnet effort failed to have much impact on test scores.

What Is Academic Performance?

Academic performance is usually evaluated based on results on state-administered tests. While the type and number of tests administered have changed over time, the state has tested 3rd, 5th, 8th and 10th graders for

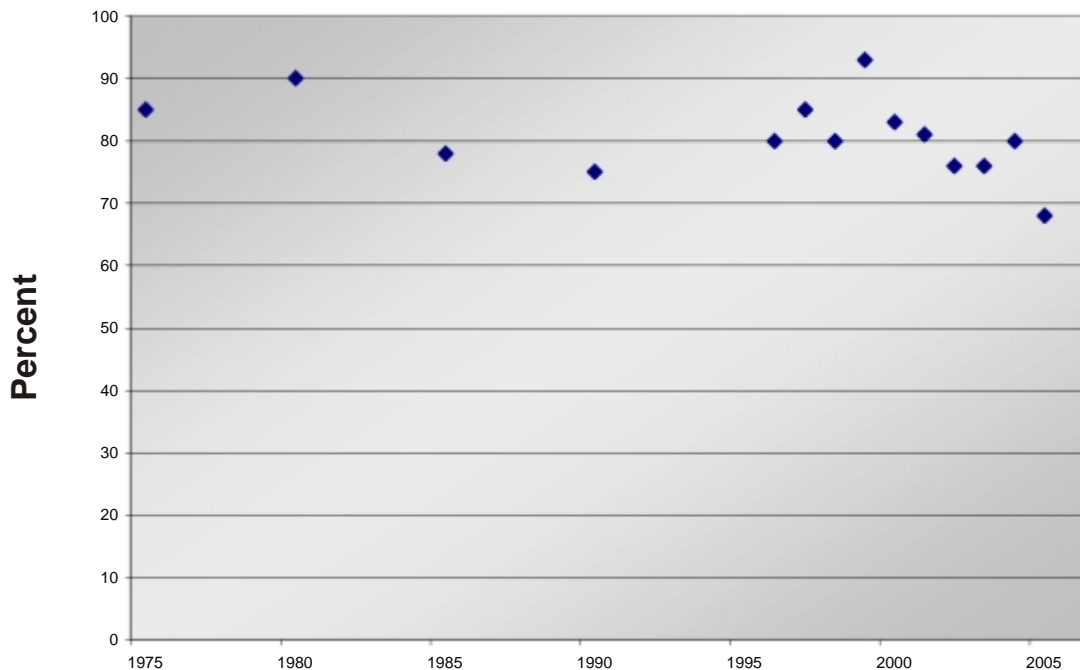
years on their ability in basic subjects such as mathematics, reading and writing. The testing process was in existence before the “landmark” statewide education reform package shepherded through the Legislature by former State Representative and Portland Mayor Vera Katz, and continues to the present day.

Despite three decades of reform efforts in the Jefferson Cluster, which have included efforts to bring in white students from around the city who would presumably do better on state tests, test scores have not improved at all. In every decade, Jefferson scores lag the state average and the Portland District average. As recently as the 2002-03 school year, 80 percent of Jefferson's 10th graders failed to meet state standards in reading, and 84 percent failed in math. In 1995-96, 84 percent failed reading and 85 percent failed math. Individual years can vary. Jefferson's results did improve in 2003-04 to 68 percent failing reading and 78 percent failing math. While such improvement is certainly positive, there's no evidence it will be sustained and it still leaves the vast majority of Jefferson students unable to perform basic tasks at an acceptable level. It is this sort of chronic low performance that has plagued Jefferson for at least three decades.

This one-year improvement in Jefferson scores could be the result of many different factors. First, it could be the beginning of a trend in which Jefferson students actually

Graph #2

Percentage of 10th Graders Reading Beneath Grade Level⁷



Source: Oregon Department of Education, Portland Public Schools and media reports

Note: Although assessment tests were given in the 1980s and early 1990s, neither Jefferson, the Portland School District or the State Department of Education can easily locate this data (see author's note, last page) although they were shared with the media at the time they were originally gathered. Points plotted prior to 1995 are approximations based on media reports.

do better because the correct mix of teaching methods have finally been implemented. A more likely but less desirable possible answer is that the 2003-04 results are a one-year anomaly. Increasing that likelihood is the availability of different levels of tests. The Oregon Department of Education allows schools to give three versions of the annual assessment tests that are rated “least difficult,” “average difficulty,” and “most difficult.” State officials say “the test design makes it possible for students to meet the standard regardless of which test form is taken.”⁸ In other words, it’s possible that Jefferson’s improvement in 2003-04 was the result of the school administering a less difficult test.

A Downward Spiral

In most cases, the elementary schools in the Jefferson Cluster are doing the best job of the three levels that are tested. Humboldt Elementary, which was the subject of the first “reconstitution” in District history in the 1997-98 school year, responded with dramatic improvement. In 2001-02 state test results showed 40 percent of students failing reading standards, 38 failing math and just 30 percent failing writing. It says something meaningful about the long history of low test scores and about our expectations when these failure rates are looked upon as a positive.

“It says something meaningful about the long history of low test scores and about our expectations when these failure rates are looked upon as a positive.”

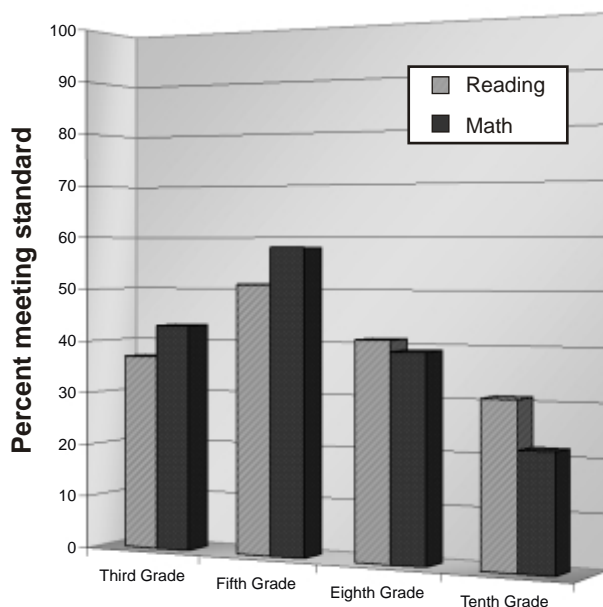
The question is whether such results stay with students. Humboldt’s students attend Tubman Middle School, and the 5th graders of 2001-02 took their 8th grade state tests this past school year. The results were mixed. Forty-seven percent of Tubman 8th graders failed to meet state reading standards and 50 percent failed in math. Obviously, families move around and every single Humboldt 5th grader did not become a Tubman 8th grader. However, it is likely that the bulk of Tubman 8th graders whose scores slipped in those three years were at Humboldt in 2001-02. This fall, many of those 8th graders entered Jefferson High School and half of them can’t read or do math to grade level expectations. This year, they will take their 10th grade state tests.

Middle Schools Failing

Jefferson administrators and parent activists have contended for years that they are playing catch-up to

teach students basic skills. For instance, they believe that most of the students who come to Jefferson as Freshmen from Whitaker Middle School are able to read at only a 3rd or 4th grade level.

Graph #3 **Test Results History Jefferson Class of 2006⁹**



Source: Oregon Department of Education and Portland Public Schools

Note: Students show improvement between when they begin school and fifth grade. However, once they reach middle school, their abilities in reading and math decline rapidly. Whereas 60 percent of students can meet standards in fifth grade math, only 20 percent are able to do so five years later.

State test result data back up this contention and point to problems in other areas and at other schools as well. In the 1999-2000 school year, for instance, 76 percent of 8th graders at Whitaker failed to meet state standards in math and 65 percent failed in reading. Other schools fare no better. In 1997-98, for example the three feeder middle schools (Ockley Green, Tubman and Whitaker) combined for an 80 percent failure rate in reading and saw more than two-thirds of 8th graders fail the math standards.

The graph above (#3) details test scores for Jefferson’s class of 2006 when they were 3rd, 5th, 8th and 10th graders. The trend is obvious and ominous. Progress is clearly made during elementary school which is later lost. Where almost 60 percent of the students could meet 5th grade math requirements, only 22 percent of the same group could do so in 10th grade five years later.

It seems clear that basic skills, how to read, how to write, how to do math problems, are not being learned at Jefferson. Tellingly, they are also being learned less and

less well as students work their way through the elementary or middle schools that feed into Jefferson for the high school grades.

Urgency, High Expectations Lacking

There are several intensely frustrating things about the lack of academic progress at these schools. Beyond the waste of human potential and the sentencing of generations of Oregonians to personal and economic struggles based on their lack of education, two other areas bear scrutiny. First is the lack of any sense of urgency on the part of the District, the school board and by some of the administrators and teachers at these schools. At Whitaker, for instance, students were reported hard at work on the production of a video to highlight the diversity at the school. While many believe diversity is important, the connection between this project and trying to increase reading or math scores seems tenuous. One parent noted that at Humboldt “there are staff there that frankly don’t give a damn.”¹⁰ Another described the situation at Whitaker as a conspiracy among some teachers to keep kids from learning.

Secondly, the same group seems tied to a set of low expectations for these students. When 1996-97 district-wide results showed at least half of Portland 10th graders could not meet state standards in reading or math, former Portland Superintendent Jack Bierwirth described it as “strong academic performance.” In 1998, Jefferson Principal Opal Chancler-Moore said that while only 15 percent of students were meeting benchmarks, her goal was to raise that number to 22.5 percent leaving more than three-quarters failing.



Community Frustrations Boil Over

The frustration in the community that surrounds the Jefferson Cluster is palpable and a pattern of their involvement emerges. Low test scores and lack of academic progress drive groups such as the Black United Front or the Community Monitoring Advisory Committee (CMAC) to confront the District leadership

with its lack of progress on the achievement gap. Usually, the community members have a list of reforms and/or commitments they would like the District to make. They complain that the reason academic progress is so low is that teachers and administrators at the schools are not doing a good job.

District leaders invariably respond that they either agree with, or are already implementing, the ideas brought forward from the community and that the problem is not the teachers or administrators, but the low-income

“All this gets lots of press and some changes both cosmetic and meaningful are made. Some years later, student academic performance has not improved, a community group confronts the District, and the cycle begins again.”

nature of the Jefferson Cluster and lack of good parenting. Community members then call for a boycott, a rally, or some other community-based action. All this gets lots of press and some changes both cosmetic and meaningful are made. Some years later, student academic performance has not improved, a community group confronts the District, and the cycle begins again.

In some ways, both groups are right. Even a cursory review of the Jefferson Cluster’s history turns up hard evidence that some teachers and administrators either do not care or do not have the tools to work with the student population they are asked to teach. Parents and students recognize these problems. In 1999, Jefferson’s sophomore class president noted that, the previous year, teachers were chronically late to class. At Humboldt Elementary in the 1980s and 90s, some teachers gave students extended time on the playground so they could drink coffee and chat. They kept their children occupied with work sheets, films, videos and Friday parties.¹¹

There is also no question that many children in the Jefferson Cluster, beginning from their earliest days in school, are sent unprepared. These children come from homes where low academic achievement may be generational. As one parent put it, “I was never any good in school, so she won’t be either.” At one school, a principal handed out alarm clocks to students who had trouble arriving on time. This was not intended as a snide comment on their tardiness, but actually pointed out the lack of responsible parents in these households.

Failed Reforms in the Jefferson Cluster

Arts Magnet (1974)
Forced Busing (1977)
Interactive Computer Stations (1988)
Community & Family Outreach (1989)
CIM/CAM (1991)
“Woodlawn Math” Curriculum (1992)
Biotechnology Magnet (1995)
Ecosystem Research Institute (1995)
Laboratory Science Model (1995)
Reconstitution (1997)
Mentoring (1997, 2002)
Business & Financial Services Academy (1998)
Sylvan Learning Center Participation (1998)
School Uniforms (1998)
Applied Technology/Explore Academy (1998)
Arts & Communications Academy (1998)
Trade Union Participation (1998)
Teams of Educators to Intervene in Poor-Performing Schools (1999)
Schools Asked to Develop Specific Annual Goals, Quarterly Indicators and Deadlines (1999)
Making Jefferson a Charter School (Proposed, 1999)
“Investigations” Math Curriculum (2000)
Instructional Specialists (2000)
International Baccalaureate Program (2000)
Open Enrollment (Proposed, 2000)
Consolidating Core Classrooms (2000)
Peer Counseling (2001)
Personalized Teaching & Active Learning (2002)
Small Classes & Clear Classroom Goals (2002)
More Volunteers (Proposed, 2002)
Freshman Academy (2002)
Parent Involvement Center (2002)
Individualized Tutoring (Proposed, 2002)
Elimination of Middle Schools (Proposed, 2006)
Single-Sex Education Options (Proposed, 2006)

Source: Media reports

Note: This list includes programs actually implemented and some that were proposed but never implemented in the Jefferson Cluster. Most had no effect on test scores and many were abandoned after only a short time. It is not intended as a comprehensive list.



It is also surprising to find a lack of consistent alarm in the local press. While *The Oregonian* has printed numerous articles about Jefferson and its issues over the years, it has failed to demand systematic changes from the Portland School Board and to keep the pressure on them. A review of back issues of community papers such as *The Skanner* and *The Portland Observer* finds only rare instances where the schools are covered at all. There are occasional articles praising achievement by the Jefferson Dancers, for instance, or covering a protest march, but virtually no editorial comment or analysis of the achievement failures.

“For example, teachers cannot be involuntarily transferred from one school to another, a practice that is allowed in other area districts... Similarly, it is also notoriously difficult to fire bad teachers.”

Schools Expand Their Role

In response to concerns over students' home lives, public schools have expanded the areas of student life in which they are involved. As early as 1990, Jefferson Principal Alcena Boozer noted that, “Schools are different today, more like small social-service agencies.”¹² In 1991, new Whitaker Principal Cynthia MacLeod said a number of social programs for families and children were being established at the school, such as parenting classes on how to get kids to do their homework, a drug and alcohol prevention program and a peer counseling group for students.¹⁴ Even if necessary, it is clear that energy expended on such programs is not available to work on academic performance directly.

This trend has also found its way into the community at large. At Humboldt Elementary, teachers have been forced to yield instructional time to well-meaning outsiders who have brought mentoring, entertainment, field trips and other distracting services.¹⁵

Reform: Reconstitution

The reform effort that received the most attention in the 1990s was the “Reconstitution” of Humboldt Elementary and Jefferson High. Reconstitution forces every teacher and administrator to reapply for their jobs. New administrative leadership is brought in, and some percentage typically 25-33 percent of the teachers are

retained. This process was undertaken at Humboldt and Jefferson High during the late 1990s under the direction of former Superintendent Jack Bierwirth and interim Superintendent Diana Snowden. Only months after Jefferson's reconstitution, and before either it or the Humboldt action could be evaluated, new Superintendent Ben Canada announced a moratorium on the practice.

Reform efforts frequently run into opposition from Portland's powerful teachers union. The union's ire was particularly raised by the short-lived effort to use reconstitution. Teachers' union president Richard Garrett, now an education advisor to Governor Kulon-goski, was incensed at the Humboldt decision in particular. Although the school had been warned after years of low academic performance, Bierwirth gave virtually no notice of the reconstitution itself, announcing in late spring that teachers and administrators would be out of a job at the end of that school year. Garrett, saying that the union could not ignore what he called “blatant disregard for the contract,”¹⁶ threatened a grievance and legal action. That case was later decided in favor of the District.



Teachers Fight Reform

The union has also negotiated other contract provisions – with the willing culpability of the School Board – that prevent some reforms or improvements in the learning environment. For example, teachers cannot be involuntarily transferred from one school to another, a practice that is allowed in other area districts. This allows poor or ill-adapted teachers to remain in schools where they may be doing more harm than good. Similarly, it is also notoriously difficult to fire bad teachers. It can take years and an expensive and time-consuming legal process for the District to get rid of a poor teacher. In one instance a poor teacher was actually reinstated by an arbitrator after being fired.

Individual teachers also found little to like about reconstitution. When Jefferson High was slated for the process, English teacher Gail Black said, “I won't reapply for a job. I have already demonstrated what I can do.”¹⁷ It's more than a little ironic that 93 percent of Jefferson's 10th graders failed to meet state standards in reading that year.

Similarly, teachers have been reluctant to embrace other efforts at reform. When Jefferson High was developing its plan to create three smaller “academies” within the school to help freshmen adapt to high school and then to expand career offerings in later grades, teachers balked. Black, who was also the building’s union representative, noted that the faculty opposed the idea and called it “window dressing.”¹⁸ This was just before Jefferson’s reconstitution. Very few teachers were retained.

Schools Within a School: Academies

The academy idea was first proposed for the 1997-98 school year. It is the reform that Jefferson Principal Larry Dashiell was lamenting the death of at the beginning of this report. The idea is to break the student body up into smaller units, in some cases having all freshmen take core classes from the same group of teachers. This supposedly allows teachers to get to know a group of students better and for students to develop a feeling of comfort and ownership.

The plan at Jefferson went through several iterations, based in part on input from the community, the District and the teachers. Originally the academies were to be Arts & Communications, Business & Financial Services and Applied Technology/Explore Academy. Each academy was to be led by its own principal and enroll no more than 350 students. The goal of the plan was to have

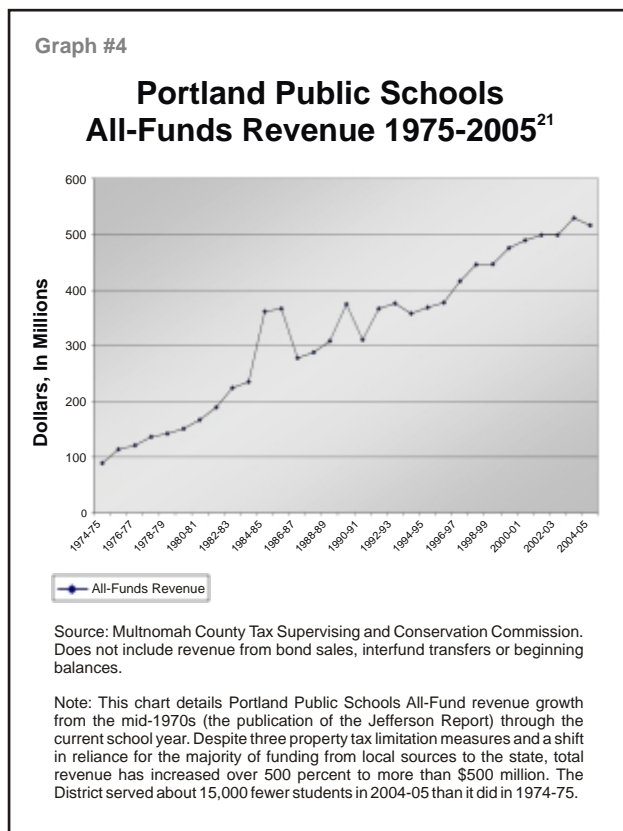
all Jefferson students meeting state standards by the 2002-03 school year. The actual result was that only 20 percent met reading standards and 16 percent met math standards.



Perhaps in response to this dismal performance, the school launched an academy for freshmen for the 2003-04 school year. This allowed them to take English, science and social studies classes from a group of common teachers, a practice that is used at some suburban schools.

But teachers and administrators have other frustrations that have nothing to do with trying to undermine reform efforts. Several years after the passage of the Katz school reform plan, schools were still waiting for the state to issue standards for the new Certificate of Initial Mastery and Certificate of Advanced Mastery. Marshall High School Principal Colin Karr-Morse, tired of waiting, began working with other administrators and teachers at the school to develop their own set of standards. “If we wait for the state, we will be here for 100 years,” Karr-Morse said.¹⁹

The District, too, takes reform actions that seem to have no hope of success. In 2000, for instance, the District implemented a plan to designate “Instructional Specialists” to help boost student performance. To fill these slots, the District chose teachers from already low-performing schools.²⁰ When Jefferson Principal Lela Roberts resigned after only 18 months on the job – and only six months after denying in a letter to students that she would leave – the District assigned her to work with principals in 10 other schools to get kids up-to-speed on reading. The next year, she was made principal of an elementary school that feeds into Jefferson. The District sets standards for the performance of its leaders, and then does not follow through with consequences when those standards are not met.

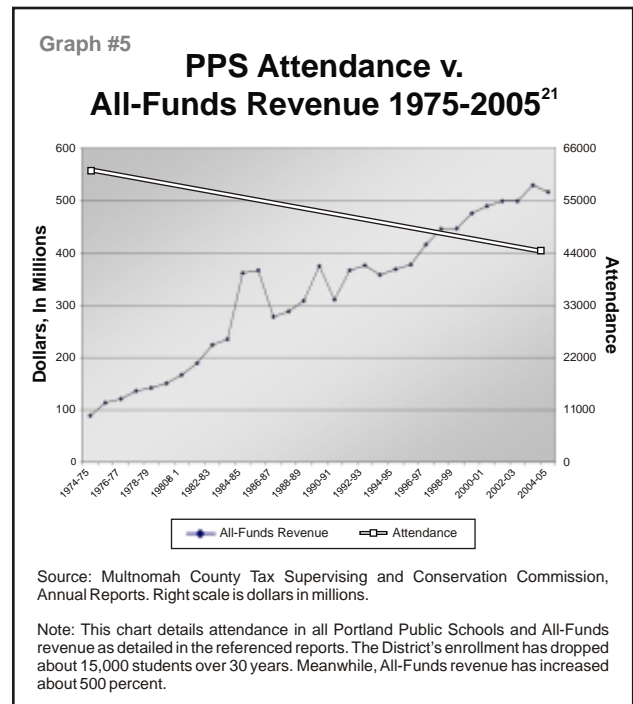


Thousands of Children Lost

Perhaps writing the epitaph for the District's hap-hazard efforts to provide a quality education to low-income and minority students, Jefferson Physical Education teacher and Coach Bobby Harris noted, "I've been here 28 years, and I'm tired of experiment upon experiment on these kids."²² And ultimately, Harris' concern is one that should be shared. For 30 years or more, Portland Public Schools has been providing a substandard education to children in the Jefferson Cluster. Almost two entire generations of children (perhaps as many as 5,000) have been passed through the Jefferson Cluster without the ability to read, write or do math at a high school level. Many thousands of others have dropped out.

Money Not the Problem

It's also not completely clear that money or class size are the problem. Both reconstituted schools Humboldt and Jefferson received more money than other District elementary and high schools and had smaller class sizes. In 1995-96, Humboldt received about 33 percent more money per student than the District average for elementary schools. In 1997-98, Jefferson received about \$1,300 more per student than the District average for high schools and had the smallest class sizes. That year, 93 percent of Jefferson's 10th graders failed state math and reading tests. As the graphs on this page show,



the total revenue available to the Portland Public School District has grown almost six-fold over the past 30 years. At the same time, the number of students served has dropped by 27 percent. Per student funding has increased from about \$1,500 per year to more than \$11,000 per year. This dramatic increase in available dollars has also had no impact on test scores in the Jefferson Cluster.

Author's Note:

It is always challenging to research and report on public education issues in Oregon. Because there are numerous passionate advocates on many sides, the subject has been a matter of controversy for decades. One of the biggest challenges is trying to obtain information from schools, school districts and the State Department of Education. In particular, assessment results (how students did on tests) is largely unavailable prior to the mid-1990s. While the test results given in the current CIM/CAM era cannot really be compared to those pre-1995, having those results would still be instructive. If 10th graders at Jefferson High have been scoring poorly on state tests since the 1970s that certainly shows that efforts to raise those scores have failed - no matter the style of test. It is also shocking that none of these entities maintain long-term records of student performance. Jefferson High told a researcher that pre-1995 results were sent to the Portland Public School District's main office and the District noted that all pre-1995 results were shredded. It seems that knowing the history of assessments would be helpful to District and school officials, not to mention parents seeking to determine whether schools might serve their children well. In other cases, such as the matter of dropout rates, the Department was very helpful in making reports available, although there's no central repository of the Department's previously published reports as there is at other state agencies. By contrast, good information on recent assessments and various other statistics and reports are available on the Department's website, as long as one does not want to go back more than about a decade.

Points to Ponder

Oregonians spend a tremendous amount of energy thinking about and worrying about their public school system. The Jefferson Cluster has attracted its fair share of that energy and worry over the past three decades. Despite the efforts of the community, teachers, administrators and District leadership, Jefferson is no better a place to learn today than it was in 1975. In some ways – such as the rise of gang activity for which the District bears little responsibility – Jefferson may be worse today than 30 years ago.

In the meantime, thousands of Portland's young people have passed through the schools and have come out unable to read, write, or do math at an adult level. These young people have fanned out into our community and one wonders what chances they had to make their mark or to do better than their parents did. In some cases these Jefferson “graduates” have children of their own going through the same system that failed them, making the failures generational in nature. Virtually every new teaching fad of the past 30 years has been tried at one time or another in the Jefferson Cluster. Incredibly, none of them have led to even a short-term improvement in student performance on state-administered standardized tests.

Some students, primarily those with parents who cared to make it happen, have used the district's liberal transfer policy to move to schools with better academic records. These students have at least had a chance to make it academically.

**Who can give them back their lives
And all those wasted years?
All those precious wasted years
– Who will pay?²³**

But who speaks for those who are left behind? For thirty years district leadership, principals and teachers have given lip service to their concerns about low achievement in the Jefferson Cluster. While they've talked, thousands of young men and women have been passed through the schools unable to read, write or do math at an acceptable level. The community has tried to drive change, but its efforts have been sporadic and ultimately ineffective. The continuing lack of progress on academic achievement for poor and minority students is a black eye for Portland and for Oregon. There are at least two generations of young people for whom it is already too late. They are already paying a price because

they are unable to reach their full potential as citizens of Oregon and this nation. The question is: what consequences should fall on those who have failed them?



Going Forward

The problems confronting the Jefferson Cluster – and most urban public schools – are difficult to resolve. During 2006, Cascade Policy Institute will work with the Jefferson Community to find possible solutions. The reader is invited to be part of this process. Please visit the CPI website at www.cascadepolicy.org.



Acknowledgments

A report such as this could not be written without significant assistance from others. The author wishes to thank Deanne Kastine for her invaluable research assistance and Cascade Policy Institute for the opportunity. Diana Biggi deserves the author's gratitude for slogging through the bureaucracy to provide research assistance as well. Portland Public Schools and Jefferson High School were as helpful as they could be. Brian Reeder and Mary Hansen at the Oregon Department of Education provided assistance with dropout reports. Dave Dillon and Jennifer Lipchin were key to the desktop publishing process.

About the Author

Matt Evans is a Principle with Wagontire Consulting in Portland. He is a former Executive Director of Oregon Tax Research and has been involved in public policy formation and research for nearly two decades.

Endnotes

1. *The Oregonian*, “Jefferson High will split into three academies” January 24, 2006
2. *The Oregonian*, “District to parents: It's truth or consequences” January 31, 2006
3. It is possible that what has been known as Thomas Jefferson High School will cease to exist. Superintendent Vicki Phillips has suggested the school incorporate students younger than traditional high school age although this idea has run into resistance in the community. Another idea currently under discussion is making Jefferson an “all-male” school.
4. *Portland Observer*, “Jefferson Loses 1/3 of Staff,” May 11, 2005
5. Oregon Department of Education, “Dropout Rates in Oregon High Schools, State Summary Report,” 1989-90 through 2002-03 inclusive.
6. *The Oregonian*, “Saving Jefferson,” Editorial, March 15, 1998
7. Post-1995 data from Portland Public Schools records and the Oregon Department of Education website: www.ode.state.or.us.
8. *The Oregonian*, “Crisis' School Surmounts Label,” February 8, 2002
9. Data from Portland Public Schools records and the Oregon Department of Education website. Scores compiled and averaged by the author for all elementary and middle schools serving Jefferson High School.
10. *The Oregonian*, “Portland Gives School an 'F,' Erases Teachers,” June 11, 1997
11. *The Oregonian*, “Humboldt Mission Contrasts With History of Failure,” August 25, 1997
12. *The Oregonian*, “Alcena Boozer Building a Better Jefferson,” December 23, 1990
13. *The Oregonian*, “Roberts Issues Rules of Order,” December 7, 1998
14. *The Oregonian*, “Struggling Whitaker Aims at Improving,” January 17, 2001
15. *The Oregonian*, “Humboldt Mission Contrasts With History of Failure,” August 25, 1997
16. *The Oregonian*, “Portland Gives School and 'F,' Erases Teachers,” June 11, 1997
17. *The Oregonian*, “Jefferson Teachers End Era With Tears,” June 11, 1998
18. *The Oregonian*, “Jefferson High Will Divide to Conquer,” April 3, 1998
19. *The Oregonian*, “Oregon Schools Ready to Change,” July 4, 1993
20. *The Oregonian*, “Many of Portland's Instructional Specialists Stay in Their School,” August 17, 2000
21. Data from Multnomah County Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission Annual Reports
22. *The Oregonian*, “Jefferson Teachers End Era With Tears,” June 11, 1998
23. Rush - “Heresy” from their album *Roll the Bones*.

