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Summary:

More than a new superintendent, the public school system itself needs radical change, and the single most important reform Portland could pursue would be to redesign how the money flows. Distributing school funding through consumers rather than providers would instantly change the balance of power in favor of parents and students.

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“We could take a different path. But first we have to admit that if system results are disappointing, we need to change the system, not the people.”

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Portland Schools Need Radical Change, Not Just a New Superintendent

By John A. Charles, Jr.

Portland school superintendent Carole Smith abruptly resigned in July, after nine years on the job. She was originally planning to retire next June, but the release of an independent investigation into the district’s inept handling of contaminated drinking water caused her to speed up her departure.

The school board immediately announced a national search for a successor, and the rest of the story is predictable. After months of searching, finalists will be scrutinized in a detailed public vetting, and someone will be signed to an expensive contract. The new leader will enjoy a short honeymoon and then gradually sink into the bureaucratic quagmire of school politics.

Amidst never-ending arguments about school transfers, graduation rates, and a myriad of other issues, buyer’s remorse will set in. Eventually the superintendent will resign and the process will begin anew.

This is the way we’ve been doing things for decades, usually with disappointing results. We could take a different path. But first we have to admit that if system results are disappointing, we need to change the system, not the people.

Large urban school districts are inherently dysfunctional. Teaching is a distributed service; the learning takes place student by student, classroom by classroom. When measured in terms of students, teachers, money, and facilities, there are millions of moving parts. The notion that a single bureaucrat in the central office can design the optimal system to satisfy all customers is a fantasy.

The system itself needs radical change, and the single most important reform Portland could pursue would be to redesign how the money flows.

Right now, tax dollars go to the district, regardless of results. Students are assigned to schools like factory widgets and few families have other options. The suppliers of service have all the leverage, while consumers have almost none.

A better option would be for the district to seek legislative approval of Educational Savings Accounts (ESAs). The ESA concept is simple: Parents who are dissatisfied with the government school assigned to them can opt to have most or all of the



per-student money that would have gone to that school for their children deposited instead in personal accounts managed by the state treasurer. The funds in each account become property of the family and may be used for a variety of educational services, including private education, home schools, online learning, and tutoring.

Ideally, any money left over at the end of a school year would remain in the account, available for future use. This would encourage wise stewardship of those funds. If the account still had money at the time the student graduated from high school, it could be used for college tuition or technical training.

Distributing school funding through consumers rather than providers would instantly change the balance of power. High-cost union contracts would have to change. Parents would need to be satisfied. And market discipline would replace ineffective top-down management.

Most parents would probably not use ESAs. It's likely they are satisfied with their neighborhood school and wouldn't want the hassle of shopping around. But the mere fact that they *could* use an ESA would create incentives for teachers and administrators to behave differently. When suppliers of a service know that 100 percent of their customers have the means to shop elsewhere, they focus on satisfying those customers.

Carole Smith was neither the worst nor the best Portland school superintendent in recent memory; she was just part of the conveyor belt of socialism that defines generic government education. Stopping the conveyor belt would be a good first step toward liberating students and improving educational achievement in Portland.

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