

October 07, 2026

Word Count: 396

Attention editors
and producers:

Cascade Commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic.

Please contact:

Cascade Policy Institute
4850 SW Scholls Ferry Rd.
Suite 103
Portland, Oregon 97225

Phone: (503) 242-0900
Fax: (503) 242-3822

www.cascadepolicy.org
info@cascadepolicy.org

4850 SW Scholls Ferry Road
Suite 103
Portland, Oregon 97225

t: 503.242.0900
f: 503.242.3822
info@cascadepolicy.org
www.cascadepolicy.org

John Charles to PPS: Instead of Closing Schools, Give Each One a Budget

By John A. Charles, Jr.

Portland Public Schools is weighing the closure in fall 2027 of up to 20 of its 81 schools, citing enrollment targets of 360 students per elementary school and 500 per middle school. Superintendent Kimberlee Armstrong is expected to present a draft list to the board in November. District officials have said elementary schools should have at least 360 students and middle schools at least 500, but Superintendent Kimberlee Armstrong has acknowledged that closing a school does not save millions of dollars.

On October 5, John Charles sent the following letter to the PPS Board proposing a different approach: set a budget for each school and let the people closest to it find a way to make it work.

Dear PPS Board Members:

I am writing to offer an alternative to the school closure process you have embarked on.

Instead of hoarding all the power, turn the model on its head and return decision-making to local school communities.

Devise a financially sustainable revenue cap for each building for the next fiscal year, and invite school communities to draft a plan that keeps their school functioning within the cap.

Once you've given them the budget goal, establish a deadline and then step back.

While the Board will always retain final budget control for the entire district, allowing school stakeholders to draft their preferred scenarios will unleash a torrent of creative thinking that would never be possible through top-down control.

For this approach to work, however, you will have to change your expectations. First, let go of the idea that there is some "ideal" size for school enrollment. There is no such number. Excellent schools



can operate at virtually any size if designed properly.

Second, temporarily suspend the district's "equity funding" policy that leaves some schools receiving only half the per-student funding of other schools. While minor variation from the mean is defensible based on socioeconomic factors, PPS takes the concept too far with its use of the "historically underserved" criterion.

The current process for deciding school closures is almost guaranteed to fail because you've already conceded that closing schools will not save the district money. If money is not the deciding factor, you don't have a persuasive case.

I am confident that parents and faculty at individual schools could meet a budget cap if authorized to develop staffing and curriculum programs that meet their needs.

Sincerely,
John Charles

***John A. Charles, Jr.** is President and CEO of Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research organization. He researches, writes, and presents testimony and analysis on state and local issues important to the freedom and opportunity of all Oregonians.*

"Instead of hoarding all the power, turn the model on its head and return decision-making to local school communities."

Attention editors
and producers:

Cascade Commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic.