Cascade Policy Institute OREGON

Cascade Commentary

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. While district leaders argue that schools below these thresholds are unsustainable, 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

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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.*

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