How might we reimagine public education in Portland?

Portland Public Schools
Visioning Process Needs Analysis Report
August 2018

PROSPECT
STUDIO

PPS PORTLAND
PUBLIC
SCHOOLS

Contents

Executive Summary

A Vision for PPS: Why Now?

Under the leadership of Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero and a committed and supportive Board of Education, Portland Public Schools (PPS) is seeking to chart a new vision for the future of public education in Portland. This vision will serve as a true 'north star,' guiding and aligning all of the district's plans and innovations. Using a broad model of community engagement, PPS seeks to engage a diverse group of internal and external stakeholders to develop this vision and accelerate towards improved outcomes and greater success for all students.

This report details a vision process Needs Analysis for Portland Public Schools conducted by a team from Prospect Studio. The purpose of this work was to get a high-level sense of the district context, the enablers of and challenges to a successful visioning process, and the hopes, dreams and expectations of a diverse group of stakeholders.

Overall, Prospect Studio engaged with over 150 people (142 through interviews and focus groups, and between 10 and 20 through the asynchronous question and answer exercise at Central Office). This included students, families, community members, teachers, principals, Central Office administrators, Central Office staff and Board of Education Directors. We promised all of our interviewees a high level of confidentiality, and asked focus group members to keep each other's confidence, therefore the findings presented in this report are high-level and synthesized from a range of inputs. We also reviewed documents and online resources including the district and the city of Portland's online content.

To those who know Portland Public Schools this document may not contain too many surprises. However, given the variety of people we spoke with, the prevalence of particular feelings and attitudes across district stakeholders give some important context for starting the visioning work. Areas of opportunity and areas that we identify as enablers of a visioning process provide options for alliances that might previously have been unknown or seemed unlikely.

Key District Priorities

Articulations of previous strategic frameworks and goals indicate that although implementation may not have achieved the results sought, the aims were aligned with the new administration's priorities and so specificity of vision and action will be important. Current priorities, as articulated by current leadership include:

- Implementation of a viable core curriculum with a scope and sequence that is aligned across the district so that all students have access to rich content

- Development and implementation of plans to strengthen instructional leadership at every site, including ongoing supports for site administrators

- Timely and responsive support to schools from the central office

- Evolving equity talk to social justice centered and systematic action that has clear and measurable results

- Maximizing limited resources so that they are aligned with instructional improvement priorities

Challenges

The main challenges facing the visioning process are highly influenced by history.

Concern About Authentic Community Engagement
Multiple less-than-ideal past experiences with stakeholder engagement have led the community to be very vocal about the importance of an authentic community engagement process that *includes follow-through*.

Ambivalence About Change
While there is a desire for transformation and action, there is also a pervasive sense of uncertainty which inhibits the openness to change.

The Shadow of History
Several people used the language of trauma in speaking with us, and others jokingly referenced "PPSD" in rueful reference to post-traumatic stress disorder with a PPS context. This can trigger expectations of negative consequences associated with this project, and pre-emptive reactions, even if the circumstances don't entirely warrant it.

**Looking Beyond Current Struggles
Towards Future Expectations**
When asking about wishes for the future, many of the responses are typically about addressing the current situation. For PPS we heard wishes for a more diverse district-wide faculty, greater safety in schools, preparation for college and career and life skills such as financial education, and differentiated teaching methods to suit different students. In addition, we heard many wishes focused on social-emotional aspects, including greater student agency and feelings of competence and confidence. The most systemic wishes were that the achievement gap predicted by poverty, race, neighborhood, or home language would be gone, and for truly equitable access.

**Shifting From a Culture of Autonomy
to One of Shared Accountability**
Schools are used to acting independently and relying on supports from their families and local communities. This local reliance can influence the resources that schools have available to them (although All Hands Raised works to address this) and lead to unintended differential expectations for students. Some account for this by stating that relationships with Central Office have not been supportive and therefore not as strong as they could be. For the vision development process and implementation to be successful the community, including all schools, need to feel part of a shared endeavor.

Media and Social Media Spotlight
Most interviewees referred to a largely toxic culture of media reporting and social media commentary - whether they are employed by this district or not. Although most acknowledged that there were some serious critical issues that attracted media scrutiny, this culture of reporting and commentary seems to have taken on a life of its own. Our concern is that the predominantly negative focus has created a climate of fear in which people are unwilling to take risks. Innovation and continuous improvement requires risk taking and permission to fail forward and adults need to be able to engage in learning and improvement without fear of public intimidation.

Enablers

Willingness and Optimism
Although there is a degree of anxiety about the immediate future based on the high rate of recent changes, overall there is a sense of hope for the future and a strong sense of PPS's potential.

Resources
Internal and external interviewees and focus groups members are very aware that the state education budget has been diminishing over the years. Despite this background, and not to underplay its impact, several interviewees also asserted that Portland Public schools has relatively good per pupil funding. We note this as an enabler here due to two factors:

- The relatively high per pupil funding

- The ways in which local initiatives, such as All Hands Raised Parent Equity Fund, and the passing of local bonds indicate strong local financial support

Community Support for Public Education
We heard that Portlanders generally are in favor of public education, and almost everyone referenced the passing of the Bond measures as a high point in recent history.

Strong Foundational Equity Platform
Many people referenced the district's equity work as a bright spot when discussing the history of the last decade. Recognizing that this work has created a foundation there is significant interest in taking the work to the next level, and developing actions and further decision support tools that will have measurable positive impacts for students.

New Board
Many people noted that previous iterations of the board have had a reputation for being contentious and dysfunctional. Perceptions of the current board are much better and contribute to a sense of hope for this next phase of the district's work.

Opportunities

Community Expectations for Authentic Engagement
Though addressed as a potential challenge, there is huge opportunity to finally meet community expectations regarding broad stakeholder engagement. Internally, district staff are more than willing to lean in to creating a culture of continuous improvement, and welcome the opportunity to participate.

City Partnership
One of the three strategies in the City of Portland's Portland Plan, referenced in the city's 2035 Comprehensive Plan, is Thriving and Educated Youth. Through the visioning work and its implementation, PPS can inform that strategy and contribute to a future-focused plan of action that links to the broader health and resilience of the city.

Recommendations

Mitigation Strategies for Potential Challenges

1 **Concern About Authentic Community Engagement:
   Provide High Level of Transparency and Host Multiple Opportunities**

   - Cultivate broad awareness of the vision work so that many stakeholders, whether they are actively engaged or not, are aware of the process, goals and status.

   - Engage a Representative Vision Design Team for a series of visioning sessions

   - Host Community Feedback Sessions at different venues and locations in the city

   - Provide Digital Forums for Asynchronous Opportunities (in multiple languages)

   - Host a Final Community-wide Installation

2 **Ambivalence About Change:
   Clear Tracking**

   - Show a clear roadmap of the whole process upfront, including the ways in which it will lead to specific actions

   - Strong project management to ensure momentum is maintained and milestones are met

- Development of supporting materials such as Graduate and Educator Portraits, strategic design principles and guidelines for the broader community to support vision and action

  - Clear board and senior leadership commitment

  - Board and senior leadership ready to move quickly into an agile strategic planning process

  - Shared ownership of the vision throughout the system will also support sustainable systemic change

3 Shift in the Data Culture:
Data Use in the Vision Process

As the district extends its use of data, and gains the benefit of communicating improvements, the vision process can be an early example of data informed outcomes.

4 Future Expectations:
Seeing What's Possible

Learning Journeys help us to see what is possible in action, help us to think beyond our current limitations, and to find new inspiration.

5 Autonomy and Individualism:
Building a Shared Vision

The vision work can help drive the creation of collective aspiration and responsibility. However, it requires some initial willingness to collaborate to get started. This will depend upon diverse, city-wide representation, as discussed above, on rapid relationship building between central office and schools, and upon consistent signaling from all points of contact between schools and central office that this work is important.

6 Media and Social Media Spotlight:
Owning the Narrative

The communications team has already begun to develop ways for the district to tell deeper stories of all of the other work that is occurring in the district. Communicating the vision process and using multiple forms to reach the maximum audience in Portland will help to support this work.

7 Sponsorship and Distributed Leadership

Executive Sponsors:
Board of Directors, Superintendent and Executive Leadership Team

- This role provides oversight to the visioning work, to ensure the project team is held accountable for progress and to clear the path for implementation.

- Decision Making Protocol: We recommend that the Superintendent, in collaboration with the Board of Directors and his Executive Leadership Team, have final decision-making authority on the final design of the visioning process and the final acceptance of the vision materials at the end of vision project.

Senior Leadership Team and Area Assistant Superintendents
(Senior Advisory Committee)

- The SLT and the Area Assistant Superintendents for Schools should be engaged in an advisory capacity to provide input and feedback to the design of visioning process.

Core Project Team

- The core project team is a highly operational team that works on a daily basis on this project. They have responsibility to keep the leadership apprised of progress.

Vision Process Roadmap

A recommended series of gatherings that depicts how a core design team (Guiding Coalition) engages the broader community.

Vision Launch — **Guiding Coalition Convening 1** — Community Meetings / Learning Journeys — **Guiding Coalition Convening 2** — Community Meetings — **Guiding Coalition Convening 3** — **Final Vetting** Cabinet Study Session Community Installation — **Final Vision**
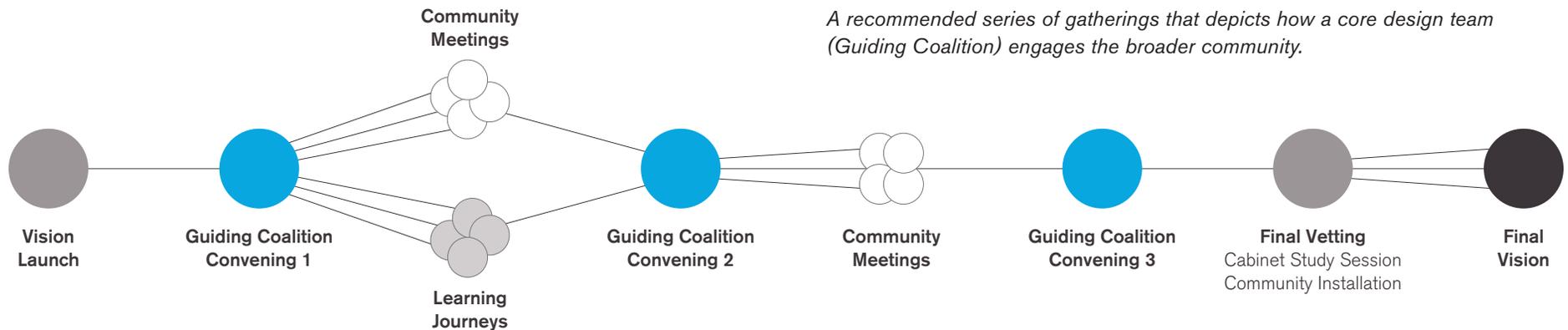
Draft Guiding Questions

Guiding questions identify areas of particular importance to the community. They are aspirational and tied to current needs. They do not define the whole of the work, but help to focus it. Where possible we like to frame our questions as "How Might We"? Questions because this framing automatically invites people to think generatively and collaboratively.

1 How might we build upon our district-wide commitment to equity so that we can more intentionally and comprehensively adopt system-wide, social justice-based actions that will lead to clearly improved outcomes for students?

2 How might we raise our sense of what is possible for all—students and adults—so that every PPS student is "sparked" by a motivating image of their future, gains a sense of their fullest potential, and knows that they will graduate on time with a definite plan for a career, whether via college or technical training, that resonates with their passion?

3 How are current and future trends shaping the world into which PPS students will graduate over the next 10 – 15 years?

4 How might we transform what, how and when and with whom students learn to prepare them for their future?

5 How might we engage community to not only gather input but to participate in an authentic call to action to improve long-term outcomes for all students?

6 What will it take to rally schools, families, businesses, the city of Portland, the District, and the community at large around a shared vision? How will we cooperate to give it life?

7 What knowledge, skills, dispositions, mindsets and experiences will the PPS graduate need to thrive in Portland and/or the global ecosystem of tomorrow?

8 What knowledge, skills, dispositions, mindsets and experiences will educators need to support the PPS graduate of the future so that each graduate can be supported by a "student success squad" whose actions are aligned?

9 What knowledge, skills, dispositions, mindsets will the larger adult community need to support the PPS graduate of the future to reach their fullest potential?

Introduction

Under the leadership of Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero and a committed and supportive Board of Education, Portland Public Schools (PPS) is seeking to chart a new vision for the future of public education in Portland. This vision will serve as a true 'north star', guiding and aligning all of the district's plans and innovations. Using a broad model of community engagement, PPS seeks to engage a diverse group of internal and external stakeholders to develop a future-facing, inclusive vision for the students of Portland and the school district community that will accelerate towards improved outcomes and greater success for all students.

This report details the first phase of a district-wide visioning process for Portland Public Schools conducted by a team from Prospect Studio. The purpose of Phase I, "Needs Analysis," was to get a high-level sense of the district context, the enablers of and challenges to a successful visioning process, and the hopes, dreams and expectations of a diverse group of stakeholders. The findings from this phase will provide PPS leadership and the Board of Education with useful data that will inform the design of the visioning process.

Overall, Prospect Studio engaged with over 150 people (142 through interviews and focus groups, and between 10 and 20 through the asynchronous question and answer exercise at Central Office). This included students, families, community members, teachers, principals, Central Office administrators, Central Office staff and Board of Education Directors. We promised all of our interviewees a high level of confidentiality, and asked focus group members to keep each other's confidence, therefore the findings presented in this report are high-level and synthesized from a range of inputs. We also reviewed documents and online resources including the district and the city of Portland's online content.

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This report is organized into six sections. The first provides an overview of our Needs Analysis and data gathering process including stakeholders we engaged with and a description of the methods of engagement. The second gives an overview of district context in terms of district metrics, demographics and data about current perceptions. The third is a set of challenges drawn from the themes generated by questions about history, hopes for the future graduates and questions about what needs to change. The fourth describes enablers, those dynamics, ideas, resources in the district that are likely to support a vision process. These are drawn largely from the hopes for the future graduates, the perceptions of the current state and the things that need to change. The fifth describes two key opportunities. Finally we give a set of recommendations for the visioning process itself, including mitigation strategies for some of the barriers we describe, draft questions that can guide the process going forward, stakeholder recruitment and a draft charter for a highly agile and responsive "core team" that will serve as the engine driving the design and execution of the visioning process.

Needs Analysis and
Data Gathering Process

During the months of June and July of 2018, we gathered information about the perceived strengths of the district, challenges to progress, wishes for the future graduates and for the district in general. This information was gathered through background research, through interviews and focus groups, and through asynchronous posting of questions and anonymous collection of responses at the Central Office.

For the individual interviews, we used a set of guiding questions collaboratively developed with senior leadership from PPS. For the focus groups, we developed interactive exercises for all group sessions, using question prompts and Post-it notes to collect responses. This enabled us to get representation and voice from everyone in the group, even if there wasn't time to discuss every response and idea. In addition we set up public question prompts in the foyer at the Central Office and took photographs of the responses regularly and replaced sheets as they became full. This exercise ran for a month. Through the interviews and focus groups we engaged with 142 people, and an estimated 15 – 20 people who responded to the question prompts at the Central Office.

Our research was guided by the following questions:

• What perceptions of the district do people have right now?
  And for students, what is the perception of their current school experience?

• How is recent history shaping people's sense of what is possible,
  and what might limit what's possible?

• What expectations do people hold for a successful visioning process?
  How are past experiences of stakeholder engagement shaping people's
  excitement or skepticism of such a process?

• What hopes do people hold for the graduates of the future and how might
  they be different from what is true for graduates of today?

• What kinds of changes do people believe are needed in order to make
  these hopes a reality?
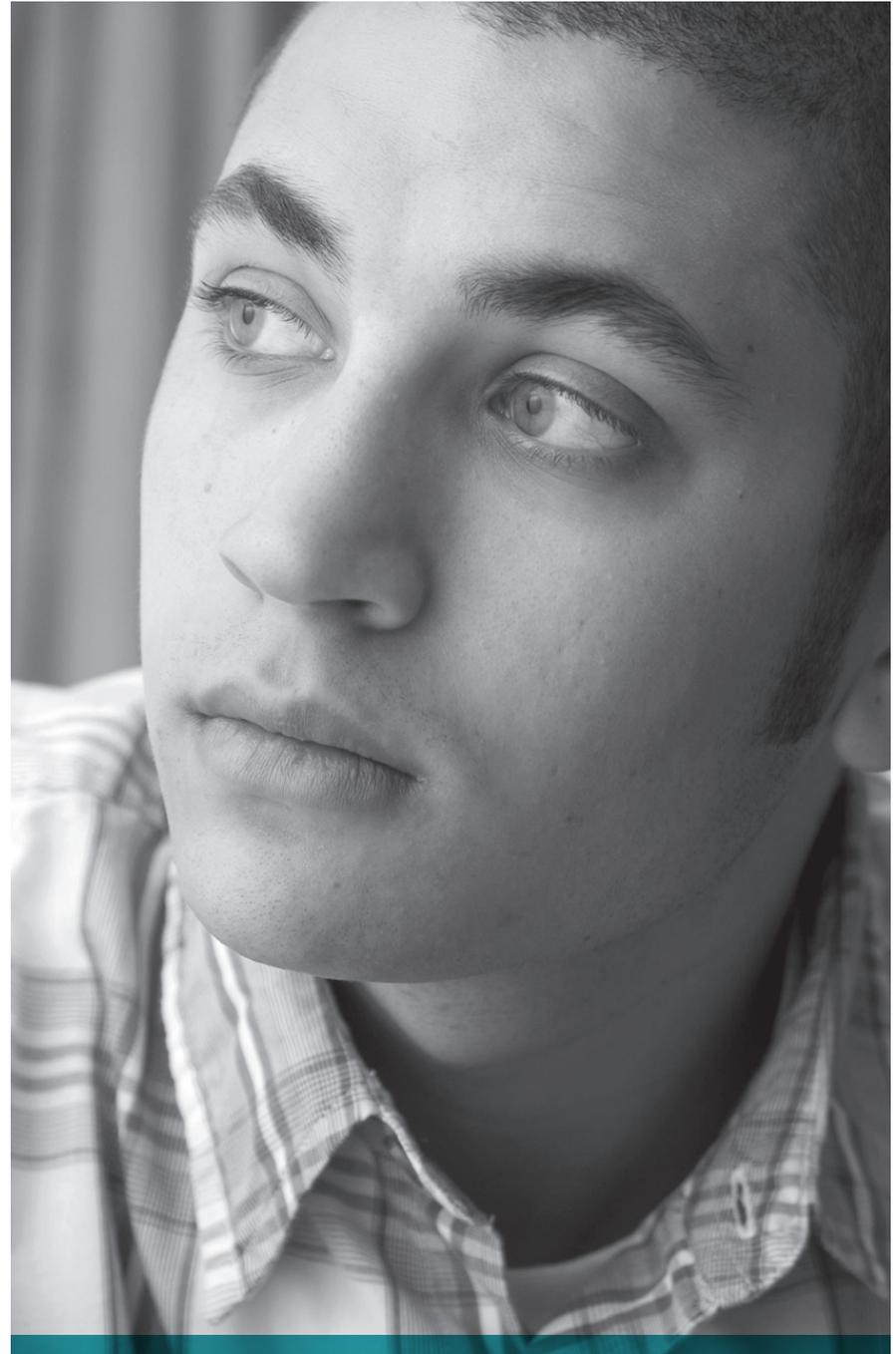
Stakeholders

Over the two site visits we met with 142 people in total and gathered input from additional anonymous contributors through the question prompts left in the Central Office for the month of July. The following specific stakeholders were engaged through interviews and focus groups:

Individual Interviews

- All Board of Education Directors
- Community Based Organization (CBO) interviews
- Senior district staff (Executive Leadership Team, ELT, and Senior Leadership Team, SLT members)
- Portland Association of Teachers President and Vice President
- Community members
- Philanthropic Leaders
- Government Officials

Focus Groups

- Students (x 4 groups)
- Supervisors of Principals
- Principals
- Teachers
- Parents and families (x 3 groups)
- Educators of color
- Central Office Instructional and Support staff

Observations

- Board of Education meeting
- SLT meeting
- Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission

Introductory Meetings

We also engaged the following groups in introductory meetings about the vision purpose and process:

- Senior Leadership Team
- All Central Office Meeting
- Communications and Public Engagement Team

Documentation

In addition we prepared for our meetings and interviews by reviewing the following digital and print documentation to gain a sense of district and city background:

- School Profiles and Enrollment Data 2016 – 2017
- Hazard, Young Associates PPS Leadership Profile Report
- 2035 Comprehensive Plan (City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability)
- Portland Public Schools Racial Equity Plan 2011 – 2016
- Portland Public Schools Racial Equity Policy
- PPS website
- *The Oregonian*
- Oregon State Department School Report Cards

District Context

District Demographics

Portland Public Schools serves more than 49,000 students, from pre-kindergarten through high school, in 79 schools. Founded in 1851, it is the largest school district in the state of Oregon.

PPS students also attend the Head Start Early Childhood Education program, nine community-based programs, seven charter schools, four alternative programs, and 11 special services programs

Total Student Enrollment: 49,557

Special Services Programs: 455

Community Based Programs: 1,035

District Schools: 46,503

Public Charter Schools: 1,564

Total Employees: 7,600

Teachers 3,439

Other 666

Classified Represented 2,031

173

425

Substitutes 866

Licensed School Administrators

Not Represented

Total Schools: 79

Elementary Schools: 32

K–8 Schools: 25

Middle Schools: 11

High Schools: 10

K–12 Schools: 1

Student Information

Black 9.3%

Asian 7.1%

Hispanic/Latino 16.3%

Multi-Racial: Other Ancestries 6.0%

Multi-Racial: Asian/White 3.9%

Pacific Islander 0.7%

Native American/ Alaskan Native 0.6%

White 56.1%

Former District Priorities

We'd like to acknowledge the following findings as part of our evidence collection process and a historical representation of district frameworks, priorities and policies. Among these, we reviewed the Portland Public Schools Racial Equity Plan (2011 – 2016) and the Portland Public Schools Racial Educational Equity Policy. While we heard a lot about the work of awareness through district-wide training in "Courageous Conversations" as well as investments in culturally specific community-based organizations, we only heard of two quick references to this board policy and plan that had been in place for multiple years.

We also noticed an absence of specific references to the previously existing instructional frameworks and priorities in interviews and focus groups, especially from those district stakeholders who have been a part of PPS prior to this past year.

However, listening to a number of stakeholders yielded themes regarding what people perceive should be priorities going forward. The current leadership culture speaks to these priorities with a bias toward action, a demand for results, and a lean toward intentionality. These "priorities in operation" are outlined below in the section The Current Priorities. They will need to be properly framed into a strategic plan once the visioning process has concluded.

According to the PPS website, the district has previously set School and Student Achievement Priorities within a Strategic "Milestones" Framework to guide educational and operational planning, policy and practice. We also saw evidence of these frameworks posted around the district.

Website Artifacts

PPS Strategic Framework
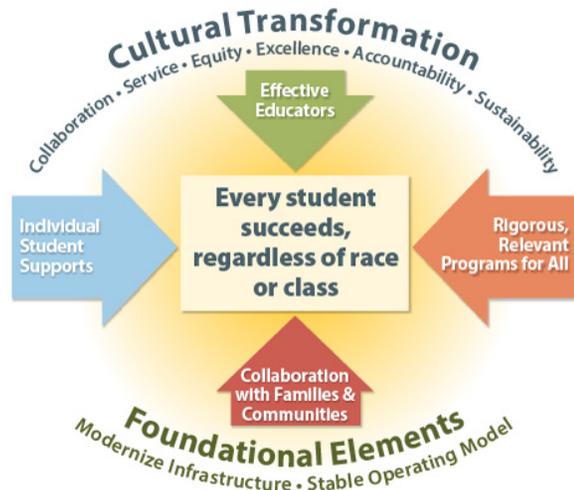
The website states that, the Strategic Framework is grounded in:

- The district's Milestones Framework with a particular focus on equity of access to a rigorous program of study and raising achievement for all while accelerating gains and closing the gaps between white students and historically under served students of color.

- The goal that "all students by name are prepared for college, career and participation as an active community member, regardless of race, income or zip code."

- The input and continued feedback from community partners, local and state leaders and PPS teachers, principals and families.

The framework focuses on four areas:

- Effective Educators:
Hire and develop diverse, culturally competent educators who hold high expectations of all students. Create opportunities for staff at all schools to collaborate to continually improve their teaching.

- Individual Student Supports:
Assess all students regularly to monitor progress. Provide resources to prevent students from falling behind and to intervene with those that do to get back on track. Invest in early childhood education and partnerships with families and community organizations to support the whole student.

- Rigorous, Relevant Programs for All:
Raise standards and expectations for all students. Provide access to the same rigorous program requirements to all students, from early childhood through 12th grade. Give teachers flexibility to make the curriculum relevant and accessible to all students so that all can learn and excel.

- Collaboration with Families and Communities:
Recognize the importance and take time to build the relationships with families and communities that allow for knowing and supporting the whole student.

In addition the following priorities are also stated on the website:

Portland Schools Priorities

- Ensure a strong principal and vice/assistant principal in every building who is well-matched to the school community.

- Create an environment in which supports are in place for teachers to thrive and have a voice in district-wide decision making.

- Every student prepared for life, college and career, and to meaningfully contribute to their communities.

- Create a system of quality instruction to increase literacy rates for all children.

- Create a system of behavior supports that will reduce disproportionality in expulsions and suspensions.

- Ensure that the School Building Improvement Bond continues tracking on time and on budget and delivers innovative, 21st century schools.

- Create a successful enrollment balancing framework that creates a foundation of equitable core programming across schools.

Student Achievement Priorities
The district has also set three priorities to drive student achievement that have been adopted by the Portland School Board. These priorities grew out of the PPS Milestones Framework:

1 100 percent of students reading to learn by the end of 3rd grade

2 Reduce disproportionate exclusionary discipline for our students of color

3 Increase the graduation and completion rates

Current District Priorities

We heard the following areas of urgent focus repeatedly from current district leaders and staff:

• Implementation of a viable and common core curriculum with a scope and sequence that is aligned across the district so that all students have access to rich content

• Development and implementation of plans to strengthen instructional leadership at every site, including ongoing supports for site administrators

• Timely and responsive support to schools from the central office

• Evolving equity talk to social justice centered and systematic action that has clear and measurable results

• Maximizing limited resources so that they are aligned with instructional improvement priorities

In addition to these education and educator support priorities, we heard a number of references made as to the importance of changing culture, such as:

• Cultivating and demanding high expectations for both students and the adults who serve them

• Reversing the historical culture of blame and fear of retaliation toward a culture of continuous improvement where learning, by both student and adults, become the engine that drives change

• Shifting public perception about the school district through improved transparency, effective communication strategies as well as measurable improvement in performance across the district.

Data Driven Culture

We heard multiple commentaries that indicate an inherited district culture that has been inconsistent in the use of metrics, e.g. to indicate progress toward goals, to measure outcomes, to assess the value of investments, to drive decisions, and to hold the district accountable. While data collection seems to have existed as an 'activity', using that data for the purpose of continuous improvement doesn't appear to be fully embedded in the culture. This is a very high-level perception, however, it is based upon the following specific examples given by multiple sources:

• Inconsistent requirements, expectations, implementation and use of student performance assessment data.

• Apparently minimal value placed on the utility of that data to inform instruction

• Acknowledgment that metrics to inform decisions and assessment of impact of district investments has been lacking in the past

• An earlier effort to create data interoperability seems to have left little residue

Current Perceptions About the District

The broad themes regarding current perceptions of PPS are provided below in a series of word clouds. These content analysis graphics use size to indicate idea popularity. In addition, colors are used to differentiate those terms with a more positive, or strength-based lean, from those that have more neutral or negative connotations. Orange is used for positive, gray for neutral and teal for negative. While not a "precise" analysis of perception, it provides a "head and heart" picture of how our interview and focus group participants feel regarding the current state of the district.

Board and PPS Staff Word Cloud

Transparecy
Ideas outpacing action
Passion
Inequitable
watershed
Tilted
Negative
Fragile
Transformational-Evolving
Toxic
Hemmorhaging
Crossroads
Educator strong
Short-term fixes
Need to heal
Disorganized/Confusing
Disconnected
Community supported
Student impact
Intense
Disenheartening
Dysfunctional
Statusquo
System of schools
Struggle
Failing
Unrecocognizable
Multiple personality
Local community
inconsistent
Wondering
Exploitation of equity
Beauracracy
Equity Work
Transition and Change
Unsupported students
Timid
Nonitclusive

Optimism-Potential-Hope

Lack leadership
Adult-centered
Pockets of excellence
Challenging
Leadership
Overwhelmed
Dedicated
Determined
Lack transparency
Central
Skeptical
Uncertain
Turnover
Untrusted
Caring
Multi-faceted
Lack of systems
Siloed
Large
Enthusiasm
Dailyourselfculture
Conflict
Fear
Under-resourced
Chaos/disarray
Media
Insular
low morale
Movement-momentum
Rebuilding
Visionless
Lots of workahead
Lack supports
Divided
Troubled

Students Word Cloud

bumpy
poor
rocky
inequitable
welcoming
traditional
involved
horrible
positive
frustrating
separate
ok
new experience
classes
confused
stressful
varied supports
lack of guidance
exciting
unsupported-not-helpful
learning
miscommunication
struggling
student-power
bad
nice
sometimes
crazy
great
overcrowded-cramped
busy
journey
budget
diversity
chill
weird
good
efficient
complicated
cramped
amazing
helpful
anger
unappreciated
loud
negative
distracting
culture
small
friends
difficult
trying
uneventful
hard
inexperienced
cool
not-much-activity
unwanted
challenging
interesting
enjoyed
joyful
white (not like me)

Board and PPS Staff Word Cloud

This word cloud includes input from all PPS staff and board members. The overriding sentiment expressed was of optimism, hope, potential and promise of a better future for staff, students and families. While the terms "transition and change" can have either positive or negative connotations, further inquiry and discussion pointed to change and transition being welcomed and needed. Many of the negative impressions were supported by examples from historical experiences that still influence current state even while staff acknowledged that change and transition is hoped for and welcomed.

Students Word Cloud

With students, there is a broad continuum of responses which indicates inconsistent experiences by students. Most students we heard from spoke of lack of support in the schools to help them learn while many spoke highly of outside supports, or specific teachers who were outliers in their multi-year experiences. There is recognition at the student level that all schools are not the same - that access to programs, classes and opportunities among schools are different and the perception is that schools on the "west side" offer better opportunities. There was also a strong desire for more educators with similar world experiences as the young people they serve so that empathy and connection could be improved between educators and students.

Word cloud text:
Total Disarray
Low-expectations
Unclear
Dysfunctional
Pervasive-Issues
Morale-issues
Facilitites-Issues
Dedicated
Opportunity
No Solutions
Educator-not-getting-what-they-need
Unprofessional
Promising-Potential
Good-response-never-helpful
Financial-troubles
Movement
Segregation
Bad-experience
Lack-of-appreciative-culture
Division-of-resources
Well-Meaning
Inequitable-systems
Nothing-Sticks
Can-Always-Find-Someoe-Who-Speaks-My-Language
Poor-communication
Confusing
Challenges-Struggle
No-Institutional-Memory
Tough-Decisions
Under-Resourced
Exclusive
Luck-of-the-draw
Nice-receptionist

External Community Word Cloud

External community included community-based organizations, representatives from government, philanthropic leaders, and parents. As with internal staff, there is a strong sense of promise and potential and many spoke of the new leadership hired by the new board as being a positive sign for positive change. The less positive experiences tended to be historical, and were centered around district response to community inquiry, district follow through on expectations regarding use of community input and general response to concerns.

Challenges

Concern About Authentic Community Engagement

The Portland community has had multiple less-than-ideal past experiences with stakeholder engagement intended to provide input to the district on an array of topics. Because of this history, the community has been very vocal about the importance of an authentic community engagement process, that includes follow-through. In order for this process to be authentic, it must broadly engage the entire community with clear outcomes and a conclusion that leads to specific actions. If this expectation is not met, it will deepen cynicism, create a major challenge to the vision process, and potentially an even greater challenge in moving the district collectively to a new future. The vision is to serve as a true 'north star,' guiding and aligning all of the district's plans and innovations toward a shared aspiration for students. In order for this vision to be a true 'north star' for all, agreement among stakeholders regarding this destination is vital so that it can function as a 'rallying cry' that invites others with shared interests, such as philanthropic partners and others, to join and contribute.

In addition to the importance of including the whole community and of ensuring follow-through, the list below describes further typical challenges community engagement will face. Recommended mitigation strategies are addressed under the recommendation section of this report.

- Engaging a broad set of stakeholders while keeping the vision design team manageable in size

- Making sure voices from stakeholders who are disenfranchised or lack typical access are integrated, including those whose primary language is not English, those who work multiple jobs making it difficult to attend engagement sessions and those who do not have access to technological resources to offer input digitally.

- Ensuring ongoing and transparent communication regarding the progress of the visioning process so that the community can stay informed.

- Ensuring the final vision resonates with a broad set of stakeholders

- Ensuring the vision is accompanied by collateral material that is specific enough to guide development of strategy

- Thoughtfully balancing the need for input with staying on track with timeline

- Prioritizing sustained leadership support by the board in light of everyday, tactical challenges and resilience for long term strategic implementation

Ambivalence About change

There is a general sense of ambivalence about change. While there is a desire for transformation and action there is also a pervasive sense of uncertainty which inhibits the openness to change. Part of this seems to be based on district history in which prior administrations have been seen as polar opposites - one instigating large-scale dramatic changes that people are still struggling with, the other - perhaps as an antidote - championing equity and focused on building relational capital, but maybe sacrificing accountability in the process.

Overall there is a sense that the experience of change has been traumatic, with the history mentioned above being capped by the recent changes in district leadership and significant staff turnover. The changes introduced by new leadership and by the vision process will need to be clear and persistent, but also take account of this ambivalence and design implementation accordingly in order to not be actively or passively rejected.

The Shadow of History

Several people used the language of trauma in speaking with us, and others jokingly referenced "PPSD" in rueful reference to post-traumatic stress disorder with a PPS context. Discussions of difficult changes in the past, or experiences in which people felt let down by process, can create an alertness to those experiences occurring again. This means that people can be subconsciously looking for those experiences, highly sensitive to early, or potential signs they may be happening. Circumstances that would in other situations be brushed off can trigger reactions intended to protect.

Looking Beyond Current Struggles Toward Future Expectations

People recognize that some schools have better options for students than others, and that expectations for students in under served neighborhoods have traditionally been low. There are some key issues that many respondents are aware of such as disproportionate discipline, a majority white faculty in increasingly diverse schools, deferred maintenance of school buildings due to earlier funding cuts and open positions, and historically a lack of aligned supports for schools.

One of the dilemmas of working with the future is that it can seem unfair to students and families who are dealing with very real difficulties right now. However, one of the useful things about asking about wishes for the future is that many of those wishes are about the current situation. The persistent current issues become barriers to thinking about the future, and yet creating a future vision is a good way to imagine a world beyond those issues, and to support the creation of solutions. When asked about their hopes for future graduates many of the responses were focused on a more diverse district-wide faculty, greater safety in schools, preparation for college and career, and life skills such as financial education.

While some respondents mentioned a desire for different teaching methods to suit different students, most of the wishes were focused on social-emotional aspects, including greater student agency, and feelings of competency and confidence. The most systemic wishes were a wish that the achievement gap predicted by poverty, race, neighborhood, or home language would be gone, and for truly equitable access.

While many respondents identified rises in graduation rates as a positive—and noted that Portland now outperforms the state average. However, people remarked that graduating does not necessarily adequately prepare students for college level work. The challenge here is to lift expectations to create a vision of the future that promises the best to Portland's students and families, and to use those raised expectations to optimize systems that can help staff deal with urgent current issues.

Shifting from a Culture of Autonomy to One of Shared Accountability

Respondents told us about Portland's uniqueness and individualism, and that schools have historically been very autonomous. We were also told that the neighborhood school model of school assignment means that people focus on their local school and do not think about other schools, or the district more broadly.

As we probed on the sense of school autonomy, to see how that might challenge the work of creating a shared, district-wide vision, we also heard that one reason for the autonomy is that historically schools have not been sufficiently supported by the central office.

Whether lack of support was the driver of autonomy, or a broader commitment to autonomy influenced the desire for support, there are four main impacts of this cultural norm, all of which intersect with equity:

1 Schools are used to acting independently and relying on their families and local communities

2 This local reliance can influence the resources that schools have available to them (although All Hands Raised works to address this through a Board recommended Parent Equity Fund)

3 It can lead to differential expectations for students, depending upon where they go to school

4 Relationships with central office have not been as strong as they could be

For the vision development process and implementation to be successful the community, including all schools, need to feel part of a shared endeavor.

Media and Social Media Spotlight

All interviewees referred to a largely toxic culture of media reporting and social media commentary - whether they worked for this district or not. Although most acknowledged that there were some serious critical issues in the district, such as the lead in water crisis, or the predatory and abusive coach who was kept on despite years of complaints, the prevailing opinion was that this culture of reporting and commentary had taken on a life of its own, beyond the issues.

Although we have looked at the media articles and some of the social media postings as part of our background research it is not our job here to take sides. We acknowledge that the relatively new communications team at the district is working to create balance in stories about the district. Our concern is that the predominantly negative focus, and the naming and shaming of specific people in social media posts, has created a climate of fear in which people are unwilling to take risks, and some have even left the district to avoid the potentially damaging professional implications of being "called out."

The work of visioning for Portland Public Schools, and the work that comes out of it will require innovation—it is important to implement known best practices, but they will not all take the district into the future. Innovation requires taking risks, and also permission to fail forward, to try things out and to learn from those things that do not work as hoped. This is a delicate enough process in K–12 education, and requires short cycles of trying and learning to minimize risks to students, but adults need to be able to know they can try things out without being publicly intimidated.

Enablers

Willingness and Optimism

Although there is a degree of anxiety about the immediate future, based on the high rate of recent changes, overall there is a sense of hope for the future and a strong sense of PPS's potential.

For some the new administration is a sign of hope. People speak about the accomplishments of the incoming team and are excited to see systems, structures, and supports beginning to be put in place. Many people referenced the long-term lack of supports, both within central office and from central office to schools, has had the effect of reinforcing site and departmental autonomy.

For others a different sense of hope—still articulated in an optimistic and usually humorous way—comes from the sense that PPS has hit 'rock bottom' and that the only way from here is up.

Resources

Internal and external interviewees and focus groups members are very aware that the state education budget has been diminishing over the years. Some referenced Measure 5, passed in 1990, that cut property tax revenues, requiring education funding to rely on the more volatile income tax.

Despite this background, and not to underplay its impact, several interviewees also asserted that Portland Public schools has relatively good per pupil funding. This is high compared to the rest of the state—although cost of living differences need to be factored in to this—and even to the rest of the country. We recognize that there are a variety of factors in calculating per pupil spending, and that it is difficult to get truly comparable district data due to the interactions of cost of living, geographic spread, local funding formulas, and timing, for example. The most recent authoritative update from the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) National Center for Education Statistics is dated February 2017 and is based on data from the 2014 fiscal year.

The following numbers are drawn from the 2015/16 census, as reported in an article in *The Oregonian*. We have reduced the number of school districts quoted in the original article for clarity of expression in this report, showing range rather than all details.

"The report detailed spending only in the nation's 100 largest school districts. Portland Public Schools ranked No. 100 by enrollment that year. No other Oregon district made the cut. Eleven of the 12 California districts with enrollments larger than Portland spent less per student."

Examples

• New York City: $24,100 (1.1 million students)

• Boston: $22,100 (53,000 students)

• Baltimore: $15,200 (83,000 students)

• Prince Georges Co, Md.: $14,900 (129,000 students)

• Hawaii: $13,800 (181,000 students)

• Atlanta: $13,500 (51,000 students)

• Chicago: $13,500 (397,000 students)

• Seattle: $13,400 (53,000 students)

• Los Angeles: $13,200 (639,000 students)

• Milwaukee: $12,700 (75,000 students)

• Portland: $12,400 (49,000 students)

• Fresno: $12,300 (73,000 students)

• Omaha: $12,300 (51,000 students)

The perception of being asked to do more with less may have been influenced by a series of continuous cuts and a reduced state budget. However, the situation regarding funding is not likely to change anytime soon, and we note this as an enabler here due to two factors: the relatively high amount; the ways in which local initiatives, such as All Hands Raised Parent Equity Fund, and the passing of local bonds indicate strong local financial support.

There are a number of other districts of similar size with similar reported per pupil spending. As part of the visioning process it may be helpful to explore them further as potential benchmarks going forward. For example:

- Boston $22,100 (53,000 students)

- Oakland $14,534 (49,000 students)

- Seattle $13,400 (53,000 students)

- Atlanta $13,500 (51,000 students)

- Omaha $12,300 (51,000 students)

- District of Columbia $11,762 (48,000 students)

- Tucson $9,900 (47,000 students)

All figures sourced July 29th 2018

The Portland Public Schools' Foundation Parents Equity Fund, managed by All Hands Raised, redistributes monies raised by schools, so that one third of everything raised after the first $10,000 goes to areas of highest need, based on a data-driven equity formula. This program, and other All Hands Raised programs, seem to be good supports for the district and have contributed to the district's action on equity, beyond the Courageous Conversations work. Due to the fact that our work began during the summer we have not been able to assess the impact of the equity fund for individual schools.

Community Support for Public Education
Related to this, a high point in recent times that almost everyone referenced was the passing of the Bond measures to support school building modernization and general improvement. For staff the passing of these bonds was a sign that the community was still in support of public education despite the issues the district had recently encountered.

We also heard that Portlanders are generally in favor of public education and the 'capture' rate of students attending public school was comparatively high. This is definitely evidence of support for public education and an enabler in and of itself. However, we caution against a risk of complacency related to

this assumption. To be clear we are not saying we heard complacency, but we are wondering if there is a potentially related question, for which we don't have evidence yet, that might reveal other dynamics at play. For example, who are the families who are choosing not to send their children to PPS? Are professional/middle class families of color, especially those moving into Portland, sending their children to charter and private schools because they feel their children are under served in the district?

If so this has possible implications for the district:

- Any achievement gap may appear to be more about race than poverty

- The considerable social, political and financial resources of these families are lost to the district.

This is an example of a 'weak signal' in futures work: a faint signal of a phenomenon that is still under the radar, but may become more significant over time. This is an area in which tracking trends could be very important for the district over the next decade or so.

Strong Foundational Equity Platform
Many people referenced the equity work that has been done in the district as a bright spot when discussing the history of the last decade. This work included the adoption of the Board of Education's Racial Equity Policy and related Plan, widespread Courageous Conversations training, and the creation of an equity lens to support decision-making. Recognizing that this work has created a foundation for equity there is significant interest in taking the work to the next level, and developing actions and further decision support tools that will have measurable positive impacts for students. As discussed above this will require robust use of data.

New Board
While reflecting on the last decade or so of PPS history many people noted that previous iterations of the board have had a reputation for being contentious and dysfunctional. Perceptions of the current board are much better. People note that this board seem more aligned and unified than previous boards, and this all contributes to a sense of hope for this next phase of the district's work.

Opportunities

Community Expectations for Authentic Engagement

Though addressed as a potential challenge, there is huge opportunity to finally meet community expectations regarding broad stakeholder engagement. Internally, district staff are more than willing to lean in to creating a culture of continuous improvement, and welcome the opportunity to participate.

City Partnership

The City of Portland's 2035 Comprehensive Plan, produced by the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, is intended to guide implementation of the earlier Portland Plan. It references that plan's three integrated strategies, one of which is Thriving and Educated Youth.

The 2012 plan sets some high-level goals, such as increasing the graduation rate, but the 2035 Plan itself is primarily focused on urban planning, economic development and sustainability. There is an opportunity for the district, through the visioning work and its implementation, to inform and clarify the vision of a thriving and educated youth, and create a comprehensive and future-focused plan of action that links to the broader health and resilience of the city.

Recommendations

These recommendations are based upon the listening process described above as well as our experience in conducting broad stakeholder engaged visioning processes in other districts. They cover recommendations for mitigating the potential challenges described above, as well as a draft process roadmap, a draft charter for a highly agile and responsive "core team" that will serve as the engine driving the design and execution of the visioning process and a set of draft questions that can guide the process going forward.

Mitigation Strategies for Potential Challenges

Concern About Authentic Community Engagement:
Host Multiple Opportunities

An approach to engaging stakeholders that is mindful of all the different ways a community can and might engage is critical in order for this vision process to be meaningful to all. First and foremost, engagement must include simple awareness about the work even if individuals choose not to or cannot engage more actively. An effective and ongoing communication strategy that provides transparency to both internal and external stakeholders regarding this effort needs to be developed from the onset of the visioning process. In addition, timely and frequent updates on the status of both the visioning process and progress will be essential. For those constituents in the Portland community who would like to more actively engage, we recommend an array of both in-person and digital, synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for input and feedback that is mindful of equity and access challenges. Therefore, opportunities for engagement should include translation and geographically accessible locations so that barriers such as language and transportation or time are considered. In addition, leveraging community organizations where culturally specific groups feel comfortable attending a meeting can encourage diverse stakeholders to engage. As a result, we recommend the following four methods of engagement that incorporate all the recommendations above:

1 Engage a Representative Vision Design Team for a Series of Visioning Sessions

Thoughtful recruitment of a Vision Design Team is critical to ensure they represent the broader school district community. A group of 70 or less will enable broad representation of stakeholders while keeping the work sessions manageable and meaningful for full engagement by all participants. In order to maintain continuity from session to session, invited members should commit to attending all convenings. In addition, we recommend up to three board members to serve on the vision design team to enable prominent representation while ensuring the flexibility and nimble nature of a design process that would be challenging to maintain in a public meeting. Our recommended list of vision design team stakeholders include:

• Board members

• District senior leadership

• Site leadership
  (Pre-K, Elementary, Middle, K–8 and Secondary, Alternative Programs)

• Teachers

• District and school support staff

• Families that reflect the diversity of the district, including those who are already highly engaged and those who are not typically engaged

• Students that reflect the diversity of the district including both student leadership and others who may have different perspectives

• Representatives from philanthropic organizations

• Representatives from Community Based Organizations

• Representatives from City and County government

• Representatives from corporate organizations

• Representatives from other learning institutions within the city and county (e.g universities, colleges, museums, libraries, etc.)

• Other community influencers

**2 Host Community Feedback Sessions
Throughout Different Venues and Locations in the City**
Ensure broad engagement of the entire community on ideas generated
from the work of the vision design team by providing accessible processes
and places for the broader community to engage. This often means
additional opportunities with specific cultural groups and offering sessions
in different languages or with translation services so that diverse voices
are included in the process. In addition, site leader and teacher sessions,
scheduled in consultation with the district calendar should be planned
to enable educators to more actively engage in feedback. Additional small
working groups as needed, for example, a group to consider the
implications of the Graduate Portrait for elementary and middle school,
should also be considered.

**3 Provide Digital Forums for Asynchronous Opportunities
(In Multiple Languages)**
Provide asynchronous opportunities, both in person and digitally, to broaden
access to those who can attend sessions in person and those who cannot
due to schedule and or transportation challenges.

4 Host a Final Community-wide Installation
When the final drafts of the vision elements have been vetted with the
vision design team, one final "installation" similar to an art or museum
exhibit should be hosted and widely publicized prior to final vetting with
the Board of Education.

**Ambivalence About Change:
Clear Tracking**
We heard from many people that Portlanders like process and like to be
involved. At the same time process is seen as necessary but not sufficient.
People also told us about times they had given input and yet nothing had
happened, or that they had been told something would be addressed but no
action was taken. The vision process will inevitably evoke some apprehension
that community input will only be a formality and that the process will not
lead to change.

It will be important therefore to show a clear roadmap of the whole process
upfront, and to indicate the ways in which it will lead to specific actions.
Strong project management to ensure milestones are met and keeping the
visioning process moving to conclusion will also demonstrate the district's
commitment to change.

Development of supporting materials such as Graduate and Educator
Portraits, strategic design principles and guidelines for the broader community
to support the vision will also provide pathways for action. Clear board and
senior leadership commitment, through regularly agendized follow-up on the
visioning work, will also signal to everyone that this work is important. Finally,
it will also be important that the board and senior leadership are ready to move
quickly, once the vision is developed, into an agile strategic planning process
that will identify the seeds of long-term change and the early wins that will
build momentum. Shared ownership of the vision throughout the system will
also support sustainable systemic change.

Once implementation begins, using prototyping processes to manage
risk while changing processes or introducing new ones will also help to
manage anxiety.

**Shift in the Data Culture:
Data Use in the Vision Process**
As the district extends its use of data, and gains the benefit of communicating
improvements, the vision process can be an early example of data informed
outcomes. The deliverables, particularly the student and educator portraits,
should also clearly tie into the use of relevant metrics to demonstrate progress.

**Looking Beyond Current Struggles
Towards Future Expectations**
One way to support thinking about the future is to explore examples on the
leading edge. Learning Journeys help us to see what is possible in action.
They will often help us to think beyond our current limitations, or find new
inspiration with which to tackle our most pressing perennial problems.
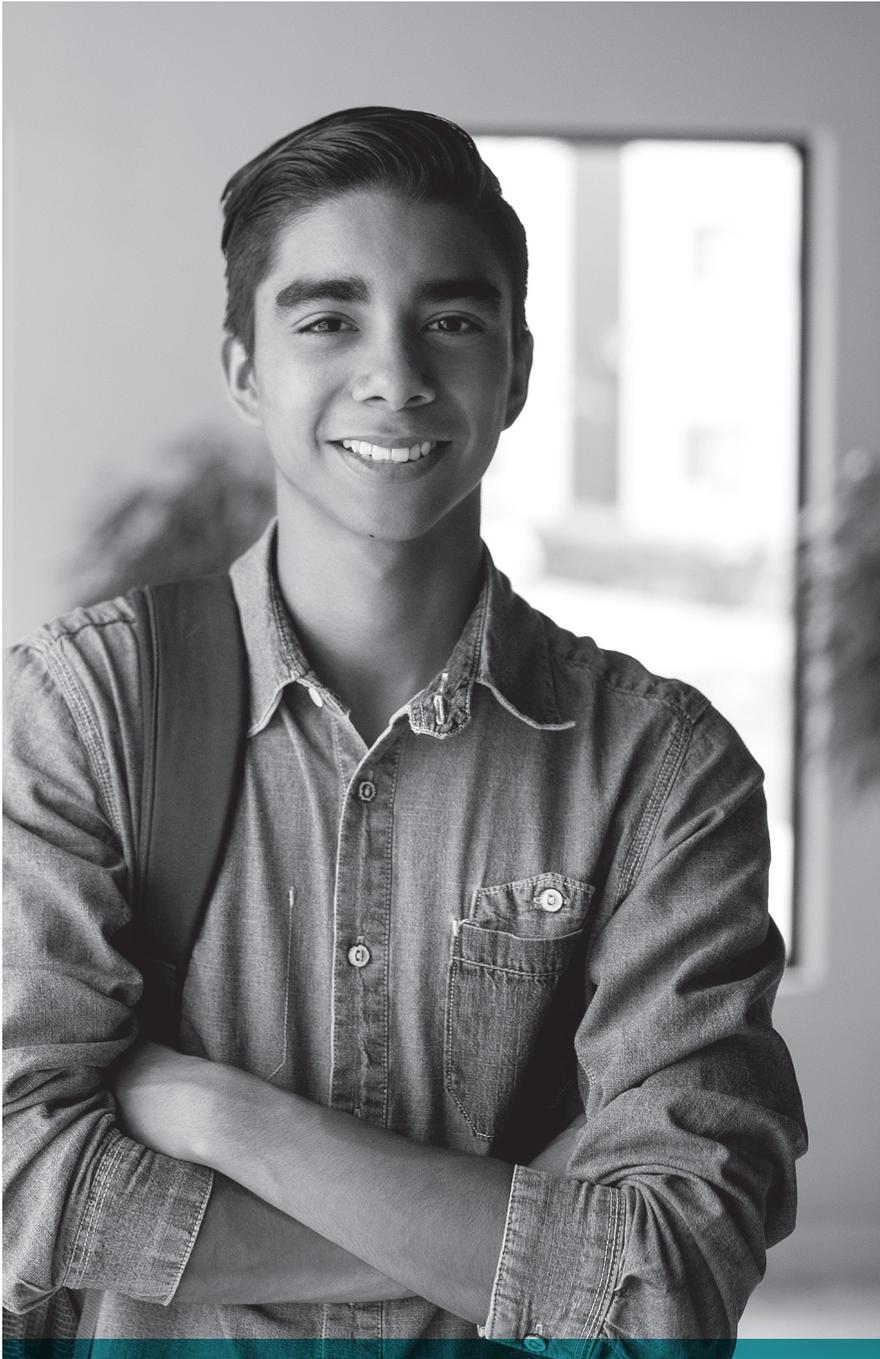
It will be helpful to develop an ongoing cycle of inspiration and design, so that new ideas can be adapted to Portland's unique context.

Shifting From a Culture of Autonomy to One of Shared Accountability

The vision work itself can help drive the creation of collective aspiration and responsibility. However, it requires some initial willingness to collaborate to get started. This will depend upon diverse, city-wide representation, as discussed above, on rapid relationship building between central office and schools, and upon consistent signaling from all points of contact between schools and central office that this work is important.

Using learning journeys to create shared experience will support school sites in gathering information and adapting it to their context. Once into the implementation phase of the vision, setting up internal learning journeys through which educators can learn from each others' best practices will also support cross-pollination of good ideas across the district and also maintain the sense of a shared future.

Media and Social Media Spotlight: Owning the Narrative

The communications team have already begun to develop ways for the district to tell deeper stories of all of the other work that is happening in the district. Communicating the vision process and using multiple forms to reach the maximum audience in Portland will help to support this work.

Sponsorship and Distributed Leadership

We recommend the following structure, roles and responsibilities of various staff to support the implementation of the visioning process:

1 Board of Directors, Superintendent and Executive Leadership Team

- Their role is to provide oversight to the visioning work, generate ideas, provide community leadership and to ensure district leadership is held accountable for progress.

- Given the accelerated timeline for this project, the Executive Sponsors have a critical role to play in removing barriers to implementation. Given the importance of transparency and accountability, regular status updates and feedback sessions should be scheduled and agendized so that the board can be fully informed and can provide feedback in a timely fashion. The executive sponsor's role of "barrier remover" will be especially essential in the Portland context to enable the superintendent and his staff to make effective progress on a weekly basis.

- **We would like to really emphasize this point:** The timeline required by this project is highly aggressive given the depth of stakeholder engagement needed and any issue that takes the work off track will put risk to timely completion needed to inform the strategic planning and budgeting processes for spring of 2019.

- **Decision Making Protocol:** We recommend that the Superintendent, in collaboration with the Board of Directors and his Executive Leadership Team, to have final decision-making authority on the final design of the visioning process and the final acceptance of the vision materials at the end of vision project.

2 Senior Leadership Team and Area Assistant Superintendents (Senior Advisory Committee)

The SLT and the Area Assistant Superintendents for Schools should be engaged in an advisory capacity to provide input and feedback to the design of the visioning process. Additionally, as a main conduit for communication to other parts of the organization, especially schools, regularly scheduled updates that keeps this group informed ahead of the larger district ecosystem is critical so that they are poised to respond to questions from the staff and school communities appropriately and accurately.

3 Core Project Team

The core project team is a highly operational team that works on a daily basis on this project. Their main purpose is to clarify the goals of the process with executive leadership and to coordinate and facilitate the development of the design for the visioning process. In addition, they will be the "boots on the ground" tactical team providing operational and logistical support to the execution of the visioning sessions. The team should be:

- A multi-faceted team consisting of the consulting team hired to design and conduct the visioning process and internal PPS staff

- Responsible for project management of vision process

- Responsible for soliciting input and feedback from leaders, such as the Board of Education, Superintendent, Executive and Senior Leadership teams, during the design phase.

- Responsible for execution of visioning activities

- Responsible for completing a charter outlining and clarifying purpose, goals, membership, and operational working agreements.

Vision Process Roadmap
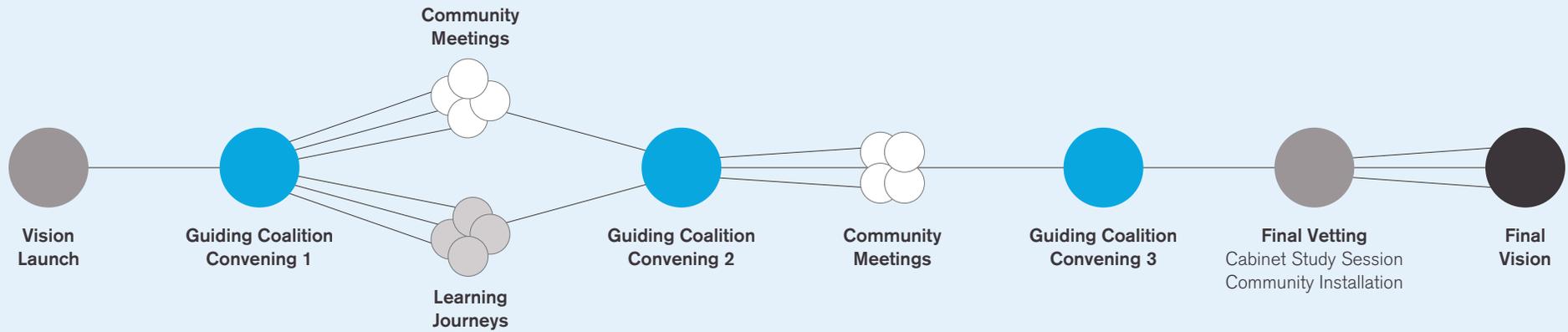
**Vision
Launch**

**Guiding Coalition
Convening 1**

**Community
Meetings**

**Learning
Journeys**

**Guiding Coalition
Convening 2**

**Community
Meetings**

**Guiding Coalition
Convening 3**

Final Vetting
Cabinet Study Session
Community Installation

**Final
Vision**

*A recommended series of gatherings that depicts how a core design team
(Guiding Coalition) engages the broader community.*

Draft Guiding Questions

Part of the purpose of our listening work is to gather input that will help to set a frame for the visioning work. Guiding questions identify areas of particular importance to the community, areas that address large-scale aspirations and are also clearly tied to current needs. These questions do not define the whole of the work, but without them the frame of reference for the work is too open to be viable.

Where possible we like to frame our questions as "How Might We?" questions, based on the work of Min Basadur, because this framing works as an invitation. It automatically invites people to think generatively and collaboratively—rather than unconstructively critically and antagonistically. In this way groups move more quickly into a constructive problem-solving process.

1 How might we build upon our district-wide commitment to equity so that we can more intentionally and comprehensively adopt system-wide, social justice-based actions that will lead to clearly improved outcomes for students?

2 How might we raise our sense of what is possible for all—students and adults—so that every PPS student is "sparked" by a motivating image of their future, gains a sense of their fullest potential, and knows that they will graduate on time with a definite plan for a career, whether via college or technical training, that resonates with their passion?

3 How are current and future trends shaping the world into which PPS students will graduate over the next 10 – 15 years?

4 How might we transform what, how and when and with whom students learn to prepare them for their future?

5 How might we engage community to not only gather input but to participate in an authentic call to action to improve long-term outcomes for all students?

6 What will it take to rally schools, families, businesses, the city of Portland, the District, and the community at large around a shared vision? How will we cooperate to give it life?

7 What knowledge, skills, dispositions, mindsets and experiences will the PPS graduate need to thrive in Portland and/or the global ecosystem of tomorrow?

8 What knowledge, skills, dispositions, mindsets and experiences will educators need to support the PPS graduate of the future so that each graduate can be supported by a "student success squad" whose actions are aligned?

9 What knowledge, skills, dispositions, mindsets will the larger adult community need to support the PPS graduate of the future to reach their fullest potential?