

[date]

Interim Superintendent and Members of the Portland Public School (PPS) Board

We of the Climate Crisis Response Committee (CCRC) write to you today with a clear, realistic vision for increasing capacity throughout the school system and for deeply addressing the myriad issues facing our students, PPS families and school communities. Our focus here in this letter is on funding specifically for at least two additional full time paid positions supporting the implementation of the Climate Crisis Response Plan, but will state at the outset that we see this funding request as intimately connected to student achievement, staff retention and every metric and marker of success within PPS. Yet we would go further and humbly ask that the school board join us in broadening our collective view of the problem at hand and to step back to view the budgetary pressures PPS faces as indicators of an opportunity to address our challenges systemically and in a way that does not sacrifice the option to solve one crisis with the illusion of focusing energy, attention and resources on another. Let us resist the temptation to cave into a scarcity mindset and instead push for solutions that minimize the possibility of multiplying our problems at a later date.

We already see now that part of our current predicament is having under-resourced our public school system over many years and sacrificed preparedness and resiliency by under-valuing the frontline professionals that serve our children five or more days per week. While the sense of overwhelm during the first years of the global COVID pandemic is certainly understandable, it would be a missed opportunity—or worse, a derailing misstep—to attempt solving PPS challenges by ignoring what we have been through or by ignoring the threats that continue to plague our communities, our interconnected world and the planet.

At the most recent CCRC meeting, our new student committee members eloquently and expertly reported on the sobering reality that young people in our schools are dealing with attitudes of overwhelm and hopelessness that go far beyond the malaise we might consider typical of the transition into adulthood. This should not be news to any of us because it has been widely reported that young people across the country are experiencing vast challenges that previous generations have not. The unprecedented conditions ranging from health and environmental crises to social and political upheaval are having deep consequences on our adult population. Why would we ever imagine that our children are impervious?

Children do need us to step up and demonstrate that we are capable of addressing their needs and valuing their experiences, voices, and development as current and future leaders. We can go a long way in doing so by continuing to invest in the path we have already chosen, that is, being a national leader by responding institutionally to the climate crisis. The Climate Crisis Response Plan and our staff working to implement it are already producing critical and illuminating results. We have an enormous opportunity to build on this work by continuing to innovate and by resourcing the work through a combination of thoughtful, calculated and continued investment.

Yet our chances of success would appear to diminish significantly if we forfeit this most prime present opportunity to review what is serving us through the onslaught of social, environmental and systemic crises we face. We must ask generally, **what has become obsolete? And then with that information begin to innovate.** When we step back and recognize the need to think about our problem solving more holistically the opportunities emerge. Specifically, we must ask:

- Is there a need to reclassify some positions that have become less effective? Can reclassification uplift currently undervalued and/or ineffective positions and simultaneously provide better compensation for more meaningful and impactful work?
- How can the positions we create add value for those who fill them as well as the students and families they serve? What so-called “soft skills” are needed as much or more than technical training? What training or support is needed to assist those who have shown loyalty and commitment in their work with PPS and through these difficult times?
- How can we reconceptualize the work of supporting students’ and families’ complex needs in challenging times and simultaneously articulate our understanding of that value publicly so that taxpayers understand the benefits and not merely the panic-inducing crises themselves. How can we inspire hope over fear, not just for our students but for all of us?

PPS administration needs to take the time, and do the difficult work of reviewing what emergent strategy is needed to stay the course and invest more in our Climate Crisis Response staffing. Rather than resorting to superficial fixes, pulling back on funding or support that might create a political win for a few, let us put our heads together in a way that shows our resolve. Two additional full time Climate Crisis Response staff is a powerful step in the right direction.

We, who serve on the Climate Crisis Response Committee have our eye on the multifaceted and complex dynamics our communities endure: the social, political, economic and environmental changes we face as a society and the sense of overwhelm that these challenges evoke in our students and ourselves. Yet we are here to say that there is hope, especially when we recognize and act upon the opportunity to solve multiple crises in tandem with one another. Let us begin by acknowledging our unique position as a national leader having already invested in and made remarkable progress through the Climate Crisis Response Plan. Can we give credit where credit is due and acknowledge the extraordinary foresight and leadership of our PPS community in beginning to tackle these enormous challenges facing every community across and around our planet. Might we still be a leader that can help ourselves through transitional times and eventually model a way forward for others?