

PortlandTribune

Outdoor School, KBPS might be casualties of budget deal

Group raises money to stave off funding blows to programs

BY JENNIFER ANDERSON

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The \$10 million deal is hardly done yet.

The City Council, Portland Association of Teachers and Portland School Board are days away from inking a deal that would stave off \$10 million in cuts to the schools -- cuts that would've likely meant 110 teacher layoffs or up to 10 fewer school days.

Yet even with the \$10 million stopgap, Portland Public Schools stands to lose other programs that have fallen below the radar in the larger budget drama.

Two historic, beloved programs in particular are among the most hands-on, real-world experiences offered to Portland students.

The proposed budget -- set for school board approval May 15 -- does not include funds for Outdoor School, the 45-year-old science and nature camp tradition for sixth-graders; nor the general manager position for

KBPS, the 89-year-old public radio station at Benson Polytechnic High School.

Bill Cooper, the station's on-site general manager for the past seven years, says elimination of his position is the beginning of the end for the station. PPS, the station's sole owner and licensee, will likely be out of compliance with the Federal Communications Commission's staffing requirements, subject to a fine of \$7,000 to \$10,000 for each offense, Cooper says.

With the elimination of his job, "the station will very soon be off the air," says Cooper, a veteran broadcaster who started his career while a student at Benson and has seen generations of students rise through the program.

"The kids lose an educational opportunity," he says. "They lose something that very few high school students in this country have a chance to experience. You can't buy this kind of real-world experience without KBPS there. Most of the other (career technical education) opportunities at Benson, they have to go outside the building."

Benson, the district's magnet for career-technical education, has lost staff, funds and programs steadily as district mandates and policies -- including the enrollment cap -- have limited their student body.

Cooper fears it'll be another "death by 1,000 cuts," on the heels of what's happened to programs like drafting and computer engineering that no longer exist.

Benson Principal Carol Campbell says she regrets having to eliminate Cooper's position but was faced with cutting 6.6 full-time employee positions this year. She wanted to preserve CTE programs and classroom teachers. Other positions that will be lost include secretaries and a campus monitor.

"We're not shutting down a radio station; I'm going to do whatever I can to keep it going," Campbell says, noting that she's looking at ways to stay within FCC compliance. "We have to try it. It's not an option for us anymore."



CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT / TRIBUNE PHOTO
Meah Welch, a sixth-grader at Self Enhancement, Inc., records her findings in a field notebook this week during an Outdoor School science lab.

Last year, Benson cut 15 full-time equivalent positions. Next year, Benson will bring in 260 freshmen -- with another 129 waiting to get in -- which will expand the school from 850 to 920 students.

Despite the growth, staff cuts come from the district's prescribed levels under the new high school framework.

Keeping Outdoor School

This is hardly the first time Outdoor School has been on the chopping block. A new group, Portlanders for Outdoor School, has formed in recent weeks to try to scrape together enough money to offer the program this fall, and then look at long-term revenue sources for the future.

"I'm hopeful that others will step up and consider this triage," says Jeanne Roy, co-director of the Center for Earth Leadership. "If we begin to lose the infrastructure -- the staff seeks new jobs and the camps close -- it's hard to get it back."

The group hopes to tap into three public sources to raise at least \$200,000 in emergency funds. Roy says district leaders have indicated they would include \$150,000 in Multnomah Education Service District funds if outside sources would contribute the rest.

The East Multnomah County Soil & Water Conservation District agreed at its May 7 board meeting to contribute \$150,000 for Outdoor School as long as PPS funds that much in its budget.

The group has also asked leaders at the city and Metro Council to do the same.

Outdoor School has long been supported by a patchwork of funding sources. This past school year, no money for Outdoor School came from PPS' general fund.

About half of the money (\$490,000) come from the Multnomah Education Service District, which runs Outdoor School.

Metro contributes nearly a quarter of the funding, \$215,470; Friends of Outdoor School donates \$38,000; and parent fees pick up the rest (\$136,500).

Portlanders for Outdoor School is proposing that PPS increase parent fees, spend \$150,000 from its MESD fund, and create a fund to "sponsor a camper" for those who can't afford the fees.

That -- combined with third-party contributions -- would come to about \$840,373, enough to send each PPS sixth-grader to Outdoor School for three days.

Outdoor School had been a six-day camp for PPS students until last year, when the district chopped it in half during a budget crisis.

Other districts have also either eliminated Outdoor School or cut it to three days. The only districts still offering a full-day program are Riverdale and Corbett.

"There are literally hundreds of thousands of people that have gone through Outdoor School and understand the basics of ecosystem functions, the importance of water quality, and key scientific concepts that have big implications on how we live," says Brent Foster, an environmental lawyer and supporter.

"Whether it's land use planning, watershed protection or controlling invasive weeds, kids who go through Outdoor School understand the issues and are able to understand the work of the world around them because of it."

If PPS drops Outdoor School, as Foster fears, it could start a ripple effect with other districts.

"People look to PPS as a leader," he says. "If it's OK for them to drop it, it signals Outdoor School has just become another program that can be considered nonessential, and that would be a huge loss."

• Public can weigh in on budget deal

Just what does the \$10 million deal include?

- Mayor Sam Adams has proposed giving Portland Public Schools \$5 million just before the next

mayor steps in.

Citizens can weigh in on the proposal at the city budget hearing set for 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Thursday, May 17 at David Douglas High School, South Cafeteria, 1001 S.E. 135th Ave.

The council will vote on the approved budget May 30.

- PPS will make another \$2.65 million in cuts, primarily through summer furlough days for non-represented central office employees as well as school principals and assistant principals in the summertime.

The school board vote is set for May 15.

- The Portland Association of Teachers would agree to \$2.25 million in delayed step increases, for a six-month period.

The union's 3,000 members are casting their votes on the tentative agreement, which includes other negotiations.

-- Jennifer Anderson

• Outdoor School celebration rally

Outdoor School supporters will have a celebration rally on the steps of City Hall Thursday, May 10, to show others what it's all about.

Activities will include wildlife tracks, native plants to identify, "cookie" nametag making, a chance to record a message to the school board, and a "kiss-a-banana slug" booth.

It's set for 4:30 p.m. outside the Southwest 4th Street entrance.

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