

PORTLAND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Appropriations Co-Chairs Senator Diamond and
Representative Kane
Honored Members of the Appropriations Committee
Educational and Cultural Affairs Co-Chairs Senator
Alfond and Representative Sutherland
Honored Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs
Committee

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I appreciate this opportunity to speak before you. I am Kathleen Casasa and I am President of the Portland Education Association and a teacher in the Portland School District.

The decisions of our elected leaders and policy makers will have a profound influence on public education in our state. During these tough economic times it is even more important to preserve the basic rights upon which our country was founded. One of these is the right to a free and public education. I would ask you to think about what it means to have a free and public education.

This principal is our commitment to all our citizens. It is our obligation to the next generation. It is our best promise for the future.

Portland is once again home to many immigrant families. Many of their children enter Portland schools speaking no English, some do not even have literacy skills in their own languages. Our teachers need increased skills, training and materials and programs to meet the needs

of these students.

Portland is a service center. Many families come to Portland for the wide range of services offered like access to medical care and mental health services. Our special education population presents a challenging range of disabilities. We offer programming for severe multihandicapped children, children with behavioral issues, autism, learning disabilities and many others identified with special needs. These students present challenging obstacles in a learning environment.

Portland is also an urban center with all the advantages and problems of city life. About 50% of our students come from poverty. The negative impact of poverty on education is well documented.

Portland also competes with many private schools to attract and program for the best and the brightest youths. Poor capital improvement, narrow range of programs and teacher layoffs will only increase the flight from the public to private education. Families of means will choose private over public. This is a threat to the very promise of American democracy.

So what does a typical classroom in Portland look like. There are 25 students: 12.5 are middle and upper income students, 12.5 are poor, 6.5 are immigrants, 3 are special needs.

Reiche Elementary and King Middle schools, inner city schools, both have been on the failing school list. Both have suffered from lack of building repairs, equipment replacement and cuts to classroom materials and textbooks and other resources, both are greatly successful and making progress currently. Our schools

have suffered from the many years of cuts to education. We have downsized, cut, trimmed, reallocated postponed and sought other revenues to accommodate less aid. There is little left in Portland's local budget. This year's curtailment and projected loss of state aid for 2010-11 will most certainly result on massive layoffs. This will threaten the successful performance of schools like Reiche and King.

You must consider all the children of our state, even the ones whose names are difficult to pronounce or the ones who cannot say their own name. Portland and the success of Portland's schools and students is important to the state of Maine and directly linked to Maine's success. Education is an economic engine for the state. The economic contribution of educational programs and employment to the state should be considered. Massive layoffs will put more people out of work, hamper any economic recovery and further impede the possibility of a well educated and trained work force for the future.

The educators in Portland are looking to you, our elected leaders, to make bold, brave decisions. Protect the opportunities of a free and public education.

Thank you.

Kathleen Casasa

President, Portland Education Association