Good evening, Mayor Snyder, City Councilors, and fellow Portlanders. As Chair of the Portland Board of Public Education, I am honored tonight to deliver the annual State of the Schools Address.

I’d like to begin by recognizing and thanking the original and current inhabitants of the land on which our city and schools stand. The Wolastoqiyik (wool-us-tug-EE-ig) or Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, Penobscot, and Passamaquoddy tribes, are known collectively as the Wabanaki Confederacy, or “People of the Dawnland.” We are honored to have Wabanaki children among our students today, and, as a district, we are committed to making the past, present, and future of Wabanaki peoples visible in our schools and classrooms.

I want to recognize fellow Board members attending tonight, along with our Superintendent, educators, and other dedicated members of the Portland Public Schools’ team. I’m so grateful to everyone who has joined us.
This annual report on the state of our schools is required by our City Charter, but it’s not just a formality. Last month, the financial website, WalletHub, ranked Portland in the top 10 of the country’s best small cities in which to live and work. Education was one of the five areas of livability that helped Portland win that high rating. And it makes sense, because schools are an integral part of any community. To have a great city, we need great schools.

The Portland Public Schools’ many accolades and accomplishments serve as testimonials to the quality education that we offer. Here are just a few of these successes:

- The district is a grand prize winner in the National School Boards Association 2021 Magna Awards program for its commitment to equity. It’s the first time in that program’s 27-year history that a Maine school district has won such recognition. We won for our Make it Happen! Program, which identifies first-generation immigrant students and helps them aspire to and understand what they need to do to be competitive college applicants.

- East End Community School was named a 2021 Model School for continuous learning by the International Center for Leadership in
Education. East End was recognized for the school's relentless focus on student outcomes in an unprecedented year.

- Many of our great Portland Public Schools staff received individual awards, testaments to the quality of the educators in our City's schools.
  - Cindy Soule, a fourth-grade teacher at Talbot Elementary School – one of the district's most diverse schools – is the 2021 Maine Teacher of the Year. Cindy was recognized for creating “a learning community that disrupts the opportunity gap [and for] fostering a dynamic learning environment that inspires curiosity and citizenship in her students.”
  - Merita McKenzie, physical education teacher and coach at Lyseth Elementary School, won the 2021 Elementary Physical Education Teacher of the Year Award from the Maine Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance. Merita was recognized for her quality programs and for serving as a positive role model and leader in her profession, school, and community.
  - José Iván Sabau Torrelo, a fifth-grade teacher in Lyseth Elementary School’s Spanish Immersion program, was selected
as Teacher of the Year 2021 by the Spanish Embassy’s Ministry of Education. Among his accomplishments, Iván was recognized for creating an “outstanding” gaming project for his students involving multicultural cooperation.

- Ocean Avenue Elementary School lead custodian Donna Colello was the runner-up in a national 2021 Custodian of the Year contest. Her hard work, kindness, and passion earned her the prestigious nomination.

- And Dr. Grace Valenzuela, the district’s executive director for communications and community partnerships, recently received the 2021 Gerda Haas Award for Excellence in Human Rights Education and Leadership from the Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine. The center described Grace as “one of Maine’s unsung heroes in the work of racial justice and human rights.” Thanks to Grace’s long years of hard work, dedication, and leadership, the Portland Public Schools has its own Multilingual and Multicultural Center that stands out as a model in Maine for meeting the needs of diverse students and their families. Grace also founded the Make It Happen! Program that earned us the Magna Award.
This year, we also marked important milestones on the long-awaited renovations of Lyseth, Reiche, Presumpscot, and Longfellow elementary schools. Lyseth students returned to a beautifully renovated building this fall and celebrated with an Oct. 28 ribbon-cutting ceremony. We held ceremonial groundbreaking events over the last several weeks at Reiche, Presumpscot, and Longfellow schools, where construction work is already underway. We are so grateful to our Portland community for their commitment to provide the children of Portland with the 21st-century learning environments they deserve and need to succeed.

The Portland Public Schools has achieved these successes and many more during a year of extraordinary challenges. We have been operating our schools amid a constantly evolving pandemic and through a labor shortage, while also managing the resulting trauma of our students and staff.

Keeping our students and staff safe and learning during this difficult time has been and continues to be our first priority. But we have done it while staying focused on the overarching mission of our district, which is achieving the Portland Promise – our strategic plan – with equity at the center of the vision we’re working toward.
As Maine’s largest and most diverse school district, equity is the centerpiece of everything we do in order to achieve positive educational outcomes for all of our students. The compounding reality of historical, generational, and modern-day systems, structures, and practices has created and continues to afford advantages to white students while perpetuating inequities for Black students and other students of color. The district takes responsibility for removing and actively repairing these inequities in order to support each student’s particular path to achieving high standards.

This past year, we approved cutting-edge policies designed to respond to and redress inequities in our school system. Our new, overarching equity policy, approved in June, defines “equity” as all people being held to high expectations and having access to opportunities that are reflective of their individual needs, identities, and experiences. The policy also serves as a guide by which to evaluate all other policies, practices, and procedures throughout the district.

Last month, the Board passed a new policy clarifying the role of law enforcement in our district. This policy disentangles school discipline from law enforcement. We also revised our other existing law enforcement-related policies. We took these steps to help address racial disproportionality in school discipline that can lead to
the school-to-prison pipeline for students and detract from school engagement and academic success.

These are just a couple of examples of our core equity work during the past year. A bit later tonight, I'll talk about the many other ways we’ve made progress toward achieving equity and realizing the Portland Promise.

Unfortunately, however, this year has not been one of only successes. Last month, we had to confront what is every school district’s worst nightmare. We learned that one of our educational technicians had been arrested and charged with sex crimes, related in part to the victimization of one of our elementary school students with special needs. We put the employee on unpaid administrative leave and terminated him soon thereafter.

Our very reason for being is to provide a safe and nurturing place for learning, and it is clear that we came up short. Words cannot express how heartbroken we are.

We have been providing support to any students and families who need it and will continue to do so as long as necessary. We are very thankful to the Portland Police Department for their prompt, thorough, diligent, and sensitive work in this
matter. It has also spurred a thorough review of the policies and practices that we should put in place to ensure that nothing like this will happen again.

In addition, we grappled this year with social media allegations made by current and former students, which forced us to confront aspects of our culture that are representative of those things we strive to eliminate, including paternalism, racism, sexism, intolerance, and harassment. And we also had to recognize that educators of color working in our schools share many of the same experiences in their day-to-day work. Both of these instances spurred action on our part, but it reminds us that the work we need to do is complex and never done.

**MANAGING LEARNING DURING COVID**

I’ll now turn to how we’ve successfully been managing learning during COVID-19. Starting this fall, Portland Public Schools has been able to educate our more than 6,400 students in-person, five days per week, with minimal disruptions to learning.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of our staff, students, and families, our mitigation measures are working. But, it hasn’t been easy. As you know, the pandemic has waxed, waned, and waxed again. There have been flattening curves, worrisome spikes, and virus variants. Throughout it all, we have continued to lead with the
scientific evidence to respond to the immediate facts on the ground while also always planning for possible scenarios ahead.

Full remote learning at the start of the pandemic in early 2020 proved to be very challenging for most students, and particularly for our least-advantaged students – students with disabilities, English language learner students, and homeless students. While we started the last school year very clear that having students attend school in-person was the best option for most, we weren’t able to hold full in-person learning for the 2020-2021 school year due to the need for social distancing and also staffing. We were forced to limit in-person attendance to a couple of days per week for most students. We established an all-remote learning option for families that could not manage hybrid learning or had immunocompromised family members. It became our second-largest school, at one point topping 800 students.

Throughout the year, we were constantly looking for ways to ensure we would be able to keep students in school. We prepared an essential school plan to meet the needs of 1,000 of our most at-risk students should we need to go full remote. Thankfully, we never had to use it.
In the spring, we were able to expand in-person learning for our students in grades 10-12 to two days per week and then, after April break, to four days per week for our students in grades pre-K-9.

By June, with vaccinations increasing for eligible staff and students, it seemed that the pandemic was on the run. Health and safety guidelines were relaxed so much that three of our four high school graduation ceremonies in June were able to take place indoors instead of outdoors. Although everyone was masked, that was a huge step toward near-normalcy for the Class of 2021. Members of that class missed out on many cherished senior-year rituals, but they showed great perseverance. They studied hard to make it to graduation, won acceptance to a wide variety of colleges and universities around the nation – many of them elite institutions – and collectively won millions of dollars in scholarships and grants. We are very proud of the Class of 2021 for their resilience through such a challenging year.

This past summer, we used federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund resources to operate the largest summer program in our history, since the pandemic has had a profound impact on the educational opportunities available to our students.
We served almost three thousand students through school-based programs, district programs that included a Language Academy and a Credit Recovery program, and many summer camps run by our partner organizations like Rippleffect, Telling Room, the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, and, of course, Portland Rec.

We provided summer meals at various sites around the city with a new twist: a neighborhood Food Service Truck that delivered meals to 10 stops each weekday in local neighborhoods. This is just one example of the way our incredible Food Service team has adjusted to changing circumstances during the pandemic to consistently ensure that nutritious school meals are available to our students.

Our students returned to full-time instruction, five days per week at the start of this school year – with new school bell times, including a later start for our middle and high school students.

Unfortunately, the start of school this fall coincided with a surge in COVID-19 cases, in Maine and nationwide. We needed to step up our mitigation measures, so we returned to maximizing physical distancing, along with vaccines, pooled
testing, universal masking indoors and on buses, daily symptom checks, and learning outdoors as much as possible. These health and safety protocols are working to keep our schools safe and enable more of our students and staff to stay in school and not have to quarantine.

Pooled testing has been a critical factor in limiting spread. The program began for kindergarten through grade 6 – who at that time were not eligible to be vaccinated – and recently expanded to include our pre-K students and grades 7 and 8. Pooled testing is voluntary and free to families – with the cost covered by the state – and there is open enrollment, so families can sign up at any point. Close to 3/4th of eligible students are participating already as are many staff.

We’ve also been offering regular COVID-19 vaccination clinics at our secondary schools for eligible students. And now that federal health authorities have approved the vaccine for children ages 5-11, we are working with our partners at Northern Light Healthcare to offer in-school COVID-19 vaccination clinics. Our first clinics for those students began today with hundreds of students getting their first vaccine. Of course, the vaccine is optional and requires family consent. Based on today's numbers, we’re hopeful a significant number of our families will take advantage of this important protection for young children.
After careful consideration, the Board this fall voted down a proposed vaccine mandate for school staff. We were concerned that a mandate might cause us to lose staff in areas where we are already struggling greatly to fill open positions. Our vaccination rate for staff stands at 94%, so we’re well on our way to a 100% vaccination rate.

The labor shortage in Maine and across the country is having a very real impact on our district’s ability to hire a range of staff, including school bus drivers. Due to that shortage, the Portland Public Schools recently had to tell our families that we may sometimes have to cancel some daily yellow school bus runs for our elementary and middle school students. We are offering bonuses and other incentives to hire bus drivers but still haven’t been able to completely fill all our bus driver positions.

We’ve asked parents to stand ready to activate their own transportation plans, such as carpooling, to get students to and from school. But we know that many families depend on us, so we’re working on our own alternatives. For example, we’re activating school volunteers to be available for carpooling. For families who don’t have other options, we’ll also be making METRO rides available to middle school students and to elementary school students accompanied by an adult. For
students who are unable to make it to school due to transportation, schools will be providing work to do at home so they can continue with learning.

In outlining our response to COVID-19, I would be remiss if I didn’t give a huge shoutout to our school nurses for the pivotal and pressure-packed role they have played throughout this pandemic. This spring, Governor Mills announced that every school nurse in Maine was named the School Nurse of the Year. Each of our Portland Public Schools nurses is truly deserving of that title!

In fact, I want to express my deepest gratitude to all of our Portland Public Schools people – our staff – who have worked incredibly hard amid evolving circumstances to ensure that our students stay safe and receive the best educational experience possible.

Although developments, such as the approval of vaccines for young children, give us hope, this pandemic continues with no clear end in sight. The challenges that we face as a school district are not easy. However, I'm confident that, working together with all of you and our entire PPS community, we will be able to confront whatever curveballs this pandemic throws us next.
PROGRESS TOWARD OUR EQUITY GOAL

Next, I'll talk about the progress we've made toward our Portland Promise Equity goal.

Equity is the center of the Portland Promise – our strategic plan. That is not just semantics; it means that equity drives everything we do. Achieving equity is essential to fully realizing our other strategic plan goals – Achievement, Whole Student, and People.

For the past five years, the Board and district leadership have consistently and openly communicated a crucial message to our community: Our district has significant gaps between our economically disadvantaged students (who are mostly students of color, English language learners, and students with disabilities) and our more advantaged students (who tend to be white). That is why we have made eliminating those gaps our central focus.

We know that these gaps are not pre-ordained. We have many students who overcome their circumstances to prove that point. Two of our 2021 graduates serve as shining examples of that:
• Linh Nguyen, a Deering High School senior, took First Place Grand Award in the 2021 Maine State Science Fair. She won for her research on how carbon nanotubes can be used to inexpensively remove arsenic from drinking water systems. Linh is now at MIT.

• Casco Bay High School senior Margarida Celestino was named a QuestBridge Match Scholarship Recipient, receiving a full, four-year scholarship to Colgate University. Margarida, whose career goal is to become a medical doctor, is the first QuestBridge Scholar in Casco Bay’s history.

But it is very hard for our students of color. The opportunity gaps these students face are not new, nor are they unique to the Portland Public Schools. They have existed for many years, and they persist in diverse school systems both nationwide and in Maine. They are due to systemic inequities that lead to opportunity gaps for Black people and other people of color, especially those who are economically disadvantaged. They exist because there are social and institutional structures that perpetuate those inequities. They exist because of systematic disinvestment at all levels of government in the institutions that support families. As such, they are not achievement gaps so much as they are educational debts.
What makes the Portland Public Schools stand out from many other districts, we believe, is our dogged focus on addressing that debt to our students.

For example, in the past five years, the number of staff we have added to help respond to our equity needs – social workers, multilingual family engagement specialists, teachers, and behavioral health specialists – has grown from just over 100 to now nearly 200 people. And our FY22 school budget, overwhelmingly approved by Portland voters, featured an historic $3 million in such equity investments.

Here are some examples of what we have done to invest in programs and services, including new cutting-edge Board policies to root out racism and inequities from our schools:

- Increasing support for our students who are English language learners (ELL) by hiring more ELL teachers, ensuring more teachers are certified to work with ELL students, adding multilingual social workers, and investing in multilingual family engagement specialists as well as youth development efforts like our nationally recognized Make it Happen! program and mentoring programs.
• Increasing our investment in Portland Adult Education for the fifth year running, recognizing that investing in PAE is an investment in our pre-K-12 students as their families seek to realize their full potential as contributing members of our City.

• Increasing staff diversity and inclusion efforts that include recruiting and supporting BIPOC educators and creating career pathways for diverse staff.

• Creating structures to enable the district to recognize and redress harassment, sexual harassment, and discrimination, including developing and approving a comprehensive policy and adding staff resources – including the hiring of an ombudsperson – to implement this policy.

• Passing an equity policy that affects every aspect of our schools, from hiring to curriculum.

• Prioritizing core instruction for equity and rigor through Wabanaki and Africana Studies, a continuation of our math and literacy equity work, the implementation of our STEM plan, and improved ways to measure student progress and achievement.

• Expanding our pre-K program to meet demand and providing transportation to ensure all families have access to pre-K.

• Ending our school resource officer program in our high schools and overhauling our punitive, outdated discipline policies, because such
programs and policies have disproportionate negative impacts on students of color and students with disabilities.

- Implementing a policy to ensure that all of our students' gender and sexual identities are recognized, seen, and honored.
- And winning a $500,000 grant from the Barr Foundation to continue our work helping more students graduate prepared and empowered by focusing on the factors that prevent some students from reaching that goal, and by providing strong transitions, high expectations, and targeted supports for those who get off track along the way.

Addressing systemic inequities does not happen overnight. We recognize that there is much more work to do and that the roots of these inequities are complex and beyond what any school district can solve alone. But make no mistake: We’re committed to getting it done. And we know that we can do it, with support from and action by our partners – City Council members, Portland’s legislative delegation in Augusta, and the entire Portland community – to repay the societal debts that result in gaps in opportunity and achievement for so many students and families. I am confident that our partnership with this City Council will only be strengthened by the addition of three new Councilors with experience and proven commitment to this work.
We invite all of our partners to work collaboratively with us and invest time, courage and boldness, steadfast commitment, and resources so that we can accomplish the goal that we all share: achieving equity for all students in the Portland Public Schools.

**CONCLUSION**

As I conclude, I would like to talk about how we are managing and stewarding our resources, since this is pivotal to our work together. I want to begin by expressing my deep gratitude to Portland voters, who in June came out decisively in support of our schools, voting by a margin of more than 3 to 1 to validate the Portland Public Schools’ $125.2 million budget for fiscal year 2022. Portland voters have consistently shown that they support our direction and focus. A great city depends on great schools, and Portlanders have time and again shown that they are deeply committed to public education.

We are also grateful to the Governor and Legislature – particularly the Portland delegation – for demonstrating their commitment to public education this year. This year’s landmark increase in State funding allowed the district to avoid expected reductions in funding from the State. We also are grateful for the federal
funding distributed to school districts nationwide as a result of the pandemic. The Portland Public Schools has received a total of about $42 million in a combination of Coronavirus Relief Funds and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds.

Because this federal support is temporary, we have avoided using these funds for long-term programs that would eventually have to be moved into the operating budget. Instead, we’ve allocated the funds to keep schools open in the pandemic – for uses that include making infrastructure investments in ventilation, technology, and outdoor learning to keep us safe. Remaining funds will be used to continue our extended learning opportunities in subsequent summers and to fund equity projects developed in collaboration with our community through a participatory budgeting process.

In addition, we are incredibly grateful to the Portland Public Schools’ many community partners, who do so much for our students and families. The Foundation for Portland Public Schools just awarded PPS educators nearly $52,000 in Equity and Innovation Teachers Grants, which will benefit thousands of students from pre-K through Portland Adult Education. The foundation also has established a Families in Crisis Fund that helps the district assist vulnerable PPS
families with emergency needs, particularly during the pandemic, and an
Addressing the Opportunity Gap community campaign to raise at least $100,000
to accelerate and expand our district’s equity work. These are among many
eamples of the philanthropic, business, and community’s commitment to our
work.

As this year draws to a close, we’ll soon begin work on our FY23 school budget. In
that work, I ask that you again join us so that together we can provide the city’s
students with the quality education needed to make progress on all four of our
Portland Promise goals, especially equity.

In conclusion, I am so very proud to live and work in a community that consistently
shows that it believes deeply in the value of public education as well as in making
that education equitable for all. Thank you to our community, our dedicated staff,
and our students who have shown such resilience throughout the pandemic. I am
so optimistic about what we can accomplish together for the children of Portland
in 2022.

Thank you, and good night.