

Housing Aid Offered to Stop Enrollment Decline

**Catherine Gewertz, *Education Week*
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In an unusual bid to stem the enrollment decline that has cost the Portland, Ore., school system millions of dollars, the city of Portland has launched a program to help families with housing costs so they can afford to rent or buy homes and—city officials hope—send their children to city schools.

National experts hailed Portland's plan for the way it explicitly joins two issues: high urban housing costs and declines in school enrollment.

"If the city of Portland is successful, this strategy could become a model for other jurisdictions," said Beverly Barnes, the executive director of Homes for Working Families, a Washington-based nonprofit group that advocates policies enabling more Americans to own homes.

The \$1.6 million Portland package, passed 5-0 by the city council on Aug. 1, sets aside \$950,000 for grants to school or community groups to promote neighborhood schools. It also establishes a \$450,000 pot of rental-assistance money for families whose children attend some of the city's most underenrolled schools, and a \$200,000 cash reserve to provide about 40 below-market-rate supplementary mortgages to help families buy homes.

City Commissioner Erik Sten, who wrote the initiative, said the district's enrollment decline of 20 percent over the past decade cannot be reversed without tackling the cost of housing. Although Portland's population is growing, housing is a key factor in the decisions of those who leave. A 2001 Portland State University study of families who moved away showed that three-quarters cited housing as a concern; only 28 percent cited schools.

Less State Funding

The average sale price of a home in the Portland metropolitan area more than doubled from 1996 to 2006, from \$158,900 to nearly \$332,000, according to the Regional Multiple Listing Service. As houses in central Portland grow pricier, families are moving toward its more affordable eastern edge, crowding schools in that part of the Portland Public Schools district and in four other school districts that are entirely or partially within the city's lines.

The demographic changes have taken the Portland school district's enrollment from 58,022 students in 1996-97 to 46,348 this past school year, representing a loss of more than \$58 million in state funding. The system has closed or merged eight schools in the past four years, said district spokesman Matt Shelby.

Mr. Sten's plan is designed to keep families with children in inner Portland and to boost school enrollment. The city will seek to create affordable housing-and-school developments in that part of town, and will work more closely with neighborhoods and school districts on Portland's east side to support and facilitate school planning expansion there, Mr. Sten said.

'An Emerging Issue'

School board member Ruth Adkins supports the stronger planning linkage of city and school concerns. "It makes so much sense not to have these be separate silos," she said. "We want to end the attitude that says, 'There is nothing we can do—it's a demographic trend.'"

One local project cited as a model for Portland's future development is Rosa Parks Elementary School. Opened in 2006, it is part of a new development that replaced a school and a housing project with homes for a mix of low- and middle-income families. As part of a "community campus," Rosa Parks shares its building with local partners such as the Boys & Girls Club.

Ms. Barnes, of Homes for Working Families, said some cities or states offer housing help to attract or keep teachers or other school employees. Chicago, for instance, offers teachers interest-free loans and cash assistance. California provides down-payment assistance and reduced mortgage rates to employees working in high-priority schools. But Ms. Barnes said she knows of no other city that is helping its school district bolster enrollment by assisting working families with rent or mortgages.

"Portland is very wise to pay attention to the combined problems of decreasing school enrollment and increasing housing costs, and recognize the connection between the two," she said.

Nationally, the cost of buying a home rose 57 percent from 2000 to 2005, she said, while incomes rose only 16 percent, an imbalance that can narrow a family's choice of neighborhoods—and thus schools.

"That doesn't often happen."

Mayors and other top city officials are increasingly recognizing the links between housing and education, said Audrey Hutchinson, the program director for education and after-school initiatives for the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, based in Washington.

"This is an emerging issue more and more folks are talking about," she said.

A high priority for Ms. Hutchinson this year is talking with mayors about how they can use housing resources to help their cities' students in school. Programs such

as the Maya Angelou Public Charter School, a residential program in the nation's capital that serves a predominantly low-income population, are sparking more talk about such support systems, she said.

David Knowles, a Portland public school parent and an executive with a local planning and engineering firm who has long been active on school issues, welcomes the focus on helping families afford homes so they can stay in the city schools. But he notes that additional dynamics have contributed to the enrollment decline.

Portland reflects national trends toward smaller families and an aging population, tilting many parts of the city toward young singles, childless couples, and emptynesters, he said. It also has suffered from years of budget cuts driven by declining state funding. He believes the underperformance of some schools has played a part as well.

"Portland schools overall perform at a pretty high level," Mr. Knowles said. "But there are some schools where performance has been an issue, and that will be an issue for families. To get them to stay or to move back into relatively affordable neighborhoods, those schools need to be improved."