Sunnyside Environmental School

Letter to the Portland Public Schools Board of Education · October 2026

To the Portland Public Schools Board of Education:

We are Sunnyside Environmental School ("Sunnyside") families, staff, alumni, community, and neighbors. Both rightsizing scenarios presented on October 6 would dismantle Sunnyside's current K-8 hybrid neighborhood/focus option school and turn it into a neighborhood K-5 without its environmental education program. This would be an effective closure of the school, even if the physical building remains, because it would result in the elimination of its curriculum and the loss of its middle schoolers, both of which are integral to its program.

Sunnyside is one of the few schools in the Portland Public School District with growing enrollment and more applicants than it can take. The data does not support shuttering its program, as explained in more detail below. **We urge the Board to preserve Sunnyside Environmental School as a K-8 school with its environmental education program intact.**

We recognize the Board faces an extremely challenging process and decision, rooted in a chronic failure by the state to fully fund public education. We want every school in the District to come out of this process with the outcome that meet the needs the students and families it serves. For Sunnyside, this means remaining a K-8 and retaining its focus option program.

Sunnyside Environmental School is working

SES is one of only 12 schools in the entire District with growing enrollment (+5.2% in the last year)[1], despite being in a high school cluster that has seen births decline by 35% in the last decade and PPS enrollment decline by 15% in the last five years (19% in grades K-5).[2] This year, Sunnyside had 101 applications for 25 open kindergarten slots and 110 applicants for 15 sixth-grade seats.[3] This growth is not negatively impacting neighborhood school enrollment at any meaningful level — Sunnyside's lottery students come from approximately 48 neighborhood schools across the District, with a median of each school losing only four students each to Sunnyside[4] Additionally, Sunnyside is a neighborhood school and its capture rate is in the top third of the District (76%)[5] In the current 26-27 school year, its enrollment has increased to 507[6], meaning **it is already meeting the District's target for a "right-sized" school.**[7] (Importantly, the District's estimated enrollment for 26-27, 482 students[8], undercounts current enrollment by 25 students, a difference of 5.2%.) By the District's own calculations, if Scenario A or B is adopted, Sunnyside's projected enrollment for the 31-32 school year would be 235, significantly below the District's target of 360 students for a "right sized" K5 school, making it more vulnerable to future closure. Under Scenarios A and B the share of students living within one mile of the school would fall from 96.8% to 65.5%.[9] **These proposed changes achieve the opposite of the District's stated goals**.

Sunnyside serves more students receiving Special Education services than any other elementary or middle school in the District except one (114 students in 2024-5, or 24%).[10] It serves a growing share of students who need the most support, including more than twice the share of students with disabilities that the state funds districts to serve,[11] 5% percentage points more than the District average share for

elementary schools and 8% more than the average share for middle schools.[12] 47.2% of its student body are from underserved populations.[13] Oregon Statewide Assessment System ("OSAS") scores in both reading and math exceed both District and state averages.[14]

Sunnyside has high attendance rates. In 24-25, 79% of Sunnyside's middle schoolers were regular attenders, nearly 10 points above the District middle school average.[15] The overall attendance rate of all Sunnyside students for the same period was 81%, well above the District average of 68%.[16]

Being a K-8 environmental school is integral to Sunnyside's continued success and keeps students in PPS

Sunnyside's history of successfully educating a mix of students demonstrates that it is an important part of the PPS portfolio. As a school where nearly one in four students receives special education services and many more are recognized as neurodivergent without official IEP plans, the support Sunnyside is able to provide across nine grade levels is a key component of its success. Research demonstrates that K-8 schools can be more supportive of neurodivergent students than stand-alone middle schools.[17] A growing body of research also links exposure to natural environments with improved attention and reduced ADHD symptoms in children, while a systematic review of 147 studies found that nature-specific outdoor learning has measurable socio-emotional, academic and wellbeing benefits for children. .[18] This is the exact sort of learning that Sunnyside provides. For example, across nine grade levels, students spend more than 7,000 hours a year learning in our school garden—a cornerstone program that helps many students thrive, including those who struggle in conventional settings.

Many families enroll and remain at Sunnyside specifically so their child can benefit from being in a K-8 setting and from our environmental education curriculum; many report that they would have left the District had they not found Sunnyside.

Dismantling Sunnyside runs afoul of PPS's commitment to climate justice education

What Sunnyside is doing isn't just working, it's what the District has committed to delivering. In 2016 the Board passed a resolution calling for climate justice education across the District, and its 2022 climate policy committed PPS to teaching students about the climate crisis.[19] Sunnyside is where that work happens every day.

Our standards-aligned, place-based environmental education curriculum engages students by tying their studies to places in their everyday lives, starting with their own schoolyard in Kindergarten and expanding outward as children mature. Middle school students spend a combined 25,000 hours per year learning in the living classrooms of our region's rivers, mountains, forests, and oceans through weekly field studies hosted by 54 community partners. Many of these partnerships have been in place for years, reflecting our school's 32-year legacy of fostering deeply rooted connections between students and physical places in their real lives.[20]

Sunnyside middle schoolers tangibly benefit the lower grades and their larger community

Removing the middle grades from Sunnyside would be detrimental to every student who attends there, and to their families. Sunnyside middle schoolers contribute thousands of hours each year to supporting younger students and strengthening the school community. Middle schoolers spend approximately 2,880 hours each year mentoring first, second, and third graders through the school's "buddy" program.[21] Many 6th–8th graders fulfill required service hours by helping adults supervise elementary lunch and recess and assisting with school events.Through these experiences, middle school students develop responsibility, confidence, leadership, and communication skills while learning to care for and serve as role models to younger children. These relationships help build a stronger, more connected school community across grade levels.

As part of Sunnyside's curriculum, middle school students engage deeply in service learning to benefit their community each year. In 25-26, students spent an estimated 1,285 hours caring for local land and waterways through projects to pull invasive ivy, clean rivers and beaches, mark storm drains, and farm, in collaboration with community partners including SOLVE, Surfrider Foundation, Friends of Mt. Tabor Park Weed Warriors, and the Bureau of Environmental Services, among many others. Students also put compassion into action. Last school year, they prepared 1,800 sack lunches with handwritten cards for neighbors experiencing food insecurity, in partnership with Beacon Village, and collected blankets and supplies for local shelters.[22]

Sunnyside middle school students also engage in legislative advocacy around issues they are studying, and have regularly testified to the Oregon State Legislature. Last year they dedicated 90 hours to writing testimony and lobbying at the State Capitol for HB 4134, a wildlife funding bill, with Environment Oregon. Our curriculum cultivates active hope, engages students with the world around them, and teaches tweens and young teens, who are just beginning to discover their agency, to use it in a positive way. These experiences build practical skills while helping students understand what it means to be part of a community: to care for their neighbors, protect the environment, and take responsibility for the places they call home.

PPS Board Policy 6.10.022-P requires the District to collaborate with Sunnyside before terminating its focus program and this has not occurred

Board Policy 6.10.022-P states that the "Board encourages the purposeful development of a variety of educational options through the cooperative efforts of the District, educators, students, their families and communities." It continues, "[t]he District shall **collaborate** with educational options to assess their ongoing assistance needs and determine their future status, including…termination[.]"[23] Both of the "rightsizing" options the District is proposing terminate Sunnyside's focus program, and to date there has been no attempt to collaborate with Sunnyside parents, students, or teachers, in violation of PPS's own policy.

If Sunnyside is made a K-5 and stripped of its focus programming, PPS will lose all the benefits detailed above

The data shows that Sunnyside is both a highly successful neighborhood school and a focus option that does not meaningfully detract from enrollment at other neighborhood schools. Sunnyside families love its environmental education programming, its longstanding culture of mentorship between older and younger students, and the deep sense of belonging cultivated by its committed teachers and staff. (Sunnyside has an 89% staff retention rate[24] and has only had three principals since it was established in 1994.) Sunnyside engages and supports students who struggle in other learning environments, many of whom are receiving special education services or are identified as neurodiverse but without an IEP. Please do not take this away from Portland, the Sunnyside community, and the over 500 students Sunnyside serves.

While we have tried our best to explain the ways in which Sunnyside's program serves PPS's students, a single letter can only contain so much. We welcome collaboration and engagement with the District and would be happy to show our school in person and answer each and every question the Board may have. We will get deep into the data with you. We will open up our school so you may shadow classes and speak with as many children, teachers, and parents as you may desire. We want to work with you. We are asking you to work with us.

OUR ASK OF THE BOARD IS CLEAR AND SIMPLE:

Please do not eliminate Sunnyside's environmental focus option or middle school program.

SAVE K-8 SES K-8 SUNNYSIDE ENVIRONMENTAL

Sign on to show your support

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Notes

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2. Portland State University Population Research Center. *Portland Public Schools Enrollment Forecasts 2026–27 to 2035–36*, tables 2.2 and 2.3. 2026. https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1785171463/ppsnet/ejdr22voeddvux8qwlob/PPS_Forecast_2026_27.pdf
3. Sunnyside Environmental School, internal data, 2026–27.
4. Portland Public Schools. *Neighborhood Distribution of Students*. October 2025. https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1764178856/ppsnet/vetwhvekrpn8zb6megbr/chartersandfocus2025-26.pdf
5. Portland Public Schools. *In-District Capture Rate*. Prepared for the Board of Education; shared in board book supplemental materials, October 2026. https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1l8xcz7lUqfdhgNDA42v0XQKECZhm_JJlxa42o5_gwHs/edit?gid=0#gid=0
6. Sunnyside Environmental School, internal data, 2026–27.
7. Portland Public Schools. *Rightsizing: Comparing the Three Scenarios*. October 2026. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ueJVC-Jo6MRKw56Jedihc6YbVdBlSB2z/view
8. Portland Public Schools, Data and Accountability. *Sunnyside School Profile*. 2026. https://www.pps.net/departments/dataaccountability/data-and-accountability/data-strategy-and-insights/internal-school-profiles
9. Portland Public Schools. *A Family Guide to the Proposed School Changes: Sunnyside*. October 2026. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1A9NQhliZOvxn2EYFwrVIj_eVJqfNQgKx/view
10. Portland Public Schools. *Enrollment Characteristics*. October 2025. https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1761768730/ppsnet/urzqafgv7wzzprexxjvw/SchoolProfiles-SPEDTAGLEP25-26.pdf
11. Oregon Department of Education. *2025–2027 Special Education Funding Considerations*. https://olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2023I1/Downloads/CommitteeMeetingDocument/287239
12. Portland Public Schools. *Enrollment of Underserved Groups*. October 2025. https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1763144125/ppsnet/dcnj7wsu9chtqzdmoxda/EnrollmentofUnderservedGroups25-26.pdf
13. Portland Public Schools. *Enrollment of Underserved Groups*. October 2025. https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1763144125/ppsnet/dcnj7wsu9chtqzdmoxda/EnrollmentofUnderservedGroups25-26.pdf
14. Portland Public Schools. *Academic Data Portal*, "OSAS All Schools" tab, 2024–25. https://www.pps.net/departments/dataaccountability/data-and-accountability/data-strategy-and-insights/academic-portal
15. Portland Public Schools. *Academic Data Portal*, 2024–25. https://www.pps.net/departments/dataaccountability/data-and-accountability/data-strategy-and-insights/academic-portal
16. Oregon Department of Education. *At-a-Glance School and District Profiles and Accountability Details*, 2024–25 report cards. https://www.ode.state.or.us/data/ReportCard
17. See, for example: O'Hagan, K., L. Stiefel, and A. E. Schwartz. "The Academic Effects of Moving to Middle School on Students with Disabilities Relative to Their General Education Peers." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 47, no. 3 (2025): 665–681. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737241229990
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19. Portland Public Schools. *Climate Justice, Energy, and Sustainability* (website). https://www.pps.net/departments/climate-justice/climate-justice-and-sustainability-main-page
20. The school was founded in 1994 under the name Environmental Middle School based in the Abernathy neighborhood, with a focus on providing place-based educational experiences for 6th–8th graders. In 2004, the program moved into its current historic 1925 red-brick building at 3421 SE Salmon St., expanding into a full K-8 school model and adopting the Sunnyside Environmental School name.
21. Sunnyside Environmental School, internal data, 2025–26.
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