

Crunch time at David Douglas

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(URBAN DIVIDES: Issues and inequities in the changing city AN OCCASIONAL SERIES)

SUMMARY: Pressure mounts in the outer-east Portland school district as more students roll in, poverty soars and teacher contract negotiations drag on

Mrs. Robinson has only 10 minutes left in her freshman English class, and one more writing exercise to squeeze in.

"I need your eyes. Give me your eyes." Faye Robinson stills her fidgeting English students with a stern look. Take out a sheet of paper, she says, "right now, really quick," and write a paragraph about one good habit you have. "Any questions?" Robinson takes a powder blue kitchen timer off her desk and twists it to five minutes. "OK, you're on the clock. Go!"

In eight short years, Robinson and other teachers in the David Douglas School District have learned an important lesson: Time moves much too fast to waste.

Enrollment in the outer-east Portland district has grown roughly a third since 1997, faster than every district in the metro area save two. In that same period, the proportion of students eligible for subsidized lunches increased to an eye-popping 70 percent, tops in the region. And the students taking ESL courses grew from 6 percent of the student body to roughly a quarter, also the highest in the area.

David Douglas High School, where Robinson has taught since 1991, has been the state's largest for three years running. When she arrived, she says, the children who needed rescuing were few enough that teachers could wrap their arms around them.

"We all knew who they were," says Robinson, a single mother who sent her three children through David Douglas schools. "But there are so many now. It's like throwing a dinner party and knowing there's not enough to feed everybody."

From east Portland to Beaverton to Gresham, schools are seeing big demographic changes. More kids. More languages. More poverty.

Nowhere have the changes hit as fast and furious as at David Douglas. Veteran teachers are frustrated. Administrators scramble for more space. And teacher contract negotiations drag on far longer than normal for the district, which has long prided itself as a family-oriented, can-do place.

This afternoon, negotiating teams for teachers and administrators head in for a second state mediation session. After nearly nine months, the issues still on the table include pay, health benefits --and tougher working conditions.

At this point, talk of a teacher strike comes in whispers. There's hope that a marathon session will settle the contract late tonight.

But the clock is ticking.

High expectations

Sprawling near Southeast 135th Avenue and Stark Street, David Douglas High School doesn't get much attention from Portland's navel-gazing intelligentsia.

It should.

Despite the rapid-fire changes, the 2,900-student high school has some of the toughest graduation standards in Oregon and a daily attendance rate of 93 percent. Last year it sent 85 percent of its graduates to a two- or four-year college. A 2002 survey found its alums posted some of the highest freshman grades in state universities. And the International Center for Leadership in Education named David Douglas as one of the nation's top 30 high schools in 2004 and 2005.

The school and the district also straddle an infill-housing boom in one of the city's most affordable areas. Apartments, town houses and condominiums have shot up in recent years thanks in large part to a mid-1990s city plan that allows far more dense building east of Interstate 205 and south of Northeast Halsey Street. Single-family subdivisions also are sprouting in the district's southern reaches along Foster Road.

The housing has drawn working-class families from the increasingly pricey inner-east side. It also has attracted immigrant families from Mexico, Russia, Romania, Ukraine, Vietnam, China, Laos, Rwanda, Congo, Uganda and Hong Kong, among other places. Today, students at David Douglas High speak more than 20 languages.

Teachers and students alike applaud the United Nations feel of the school, though they groan about packed lunchrooms and hallways.

At the same time, teachers say the changes, particularly the increased poverty, take their toll. The new students bring in more state money, so class sizes have ticked up only two or three students. But the students' needs, both economic and academic, have risen dramatically.

Two years ago, a group of teachers started "Celtic Heart," setting aside clothes, hygiene supplies and food in a closet for students from poor families. Now the program spreads across much of a basement storage room, allowing students to discreetly take home food in backpacks the program provides. Last year, it served more than 300 students.

Michael Baker has taught at the school since 1981. Between the contract fight and the growing challenges of the job, he says, this has been his toughest year. In his freshman English class recently, one student sped through a novel while Baker went over vocabulary words. Another couldn't repeat a short sentence in English at Baker's request.

"I think I'm not as good of a teacher as I used to be because I have so many kids who are very, very needy," Baker says. "I feel like a butterfly floating around the classroom, touching down here and there. I need to spend 20 minutes with this kid, but I've only got 30 seconds."

Principal Randy Hutchinson says administrators are trying to address the challenges teachers face. They have boosted training in working with different cultures and languages. Core classes generally stay under 30 students. ESL instruction has jumped.

But the changes are huge, Hutchinson agrees, and David Douglas' graduation requirements add to the pressure on teachers. The school requires 25 credits, not the state-mandated 22. Students must get at least C's in core freshman and sophomore courses, complete a scored portfolio of work and achieve a minimum score on state tests.

Those requirements hold teachers more accountable for their work than at other high schools, Hutchinson says: "There isn't a teacher in this building who isn't working really hard."

Next door to Baker, 19-year teacher Kristy Aalberg darts around her classroom to help students working on assignments. She makes them laugh. She talks fast and scribbles main points on the chalkboard.

Aalberg arrives at school at 6:45 a.m. and grades papers over the weekend and at night. During the half-hour lunch period, students drop in for extra help. Right now, she's also writing dozens of recommendations for her college-bound seniors.

Aalberg hardly lacks for energy. She has run 22 marathons. But she says she's maxed out. "The amount of kids who need stuff from me is gargantuan," she says. "I just feel like, how can I work any harder?"

Students see good and bad: The school's size and mix brings a variety of clubs and activities, and the chance for anyone to find a place to fit in. But teachers have less time to spend with them.

"It's harder to get help from a teacher one-on-one," senior Alix Sandbothe says. "You have to be here before school or an hour after, and then you'll only get five minutes."

Ongoing talks, differences

Against that backdrop, the school district's initial offer of a 1 percent raise (now 1.5 percent) struck many teachers as an insult.

Teachers say the district can afford a better offer. It has \$28 million in reserves, larger than surrounding districts that have settled contracts of late.

A widely distributed November memo from Superintendent Barbara Rommel to families rubbed teachers wrong, too. In it, Rommel said she was thankful for students and parents but "discouraged" by negotiations with the teachers union.

But administrators and the district board also feel squeezed. The three-year county income tax for schools and other services expires after this year. There's talk of renewing it. If that effort fails, it would blast a \$10 million hole in the district's \$78 million operating budget.

The rapid enrollment growth could mean asking the district's conservative electorate for another school building bond as early as 2006. Voters passed the last one in 2000. But if they balk at another effort, the district might have to tap reserves.

Administrators note they have no control over new development, and state law prohibits charging developers fees for schools.

The teachers' proposal for a 2.75 percent raise on top of inflation would cost about \$800,000 a year more than the district's offer, administrators estimate. Most teachers also get a 4 percent bump for gaining a year of experience.

Beyond wages, the two sides remain far apart on health benefits, sick days, tuition reimbursement and a host of other issues.

"There's a tendency with almost everybody to feel underappreciated," Rommel, a former teacher, says of the teachers' concerns. "If you make another percent a year is that going to make a difference?"

David Douglas' 619 teachers make \$49,468 a year on average, the district says. A district comparison indicates its starting teacher salary of \$34,670 is high in the region. Salaries for experienced teachers are mid-range, including the maximum: \$65,140.

Rommel says she wasn't trying to put down teachers with her memo, which did call them "dedicated professionals."

"The teachers are wonderful," she says. "They've worked really hard at making connections and making students feel that people really care about them. I'm sorry there wasn't a bold headline (in the memo) that said that."

Rommel and union leaders hope tonight's mediation session will end with a settlement.

So do the teachers, including Robinson. "Nobody wants to strike if we don't have to," Robinson says. "We know these kids can't afford to fall behind."

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ILLUSTRATION: Color Photos by The Oregonian / BENJAMIN BRINK

ILLUSTRATION: Graphic -- chart by MICHAEL MODE / The Oregonian -- RAPID CHANGES - David Douglas School District enrollment

ILLUSTRATION: Sidebar text -- NATALYA TUPITSYNA

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