Re: Portland Public Schools Proposed School Closures and Consolidation

Dear Portland Public Schools Board of Education,

The St. Johns Neighborhood Association (SJNA) is writing to express its opposition to Portland Public Schools' (PPS) proposed closures and consolidations and to raise concerns about their potential long-term impacts on families and the broader North Portland community.

Neighborhood schools are more than educational facilities. They connect families, support walkability, contribute to neighborhood identity, and help sustain established communities. Decisions about school closures should therefore consider not only enrollment, facilities, and operational needs, but also the broader effects on the communities these schools serve.

Neighborhood Stability and Accessibility

SJNA is concerned that the proposed closures would dismantle functioning neighborhood school models as PPS seeks to address broader district challenges, potentially creating significant geographic barriers for students and families. Consolidation could increase travel distances, complicate access to safe walking and biking routes, and place additional transportation burdens on families. These changes could also disrupt established community connections and affect residents throughout North Portland.

Beyond educational instruction, local schools generate consistent foot traffic and cultivate enduring bonds between residents, parents, and youth. They function as vital anchors within the broader civic infrastructure rather than mere facilities. SJNA respectfully requests that PPS thoroughly weigh these community factors alongside budgetary targets and evaluate solutions that avoid closing these essential institutions.

Both James John and Sitton are valued parts of the broader St. Johns community. James John Elementary is located in the heart of St. Johns' urban core, where its presence contributes to the activity and vitality of the abutting commercial center. Sitton provides an important gathering and recreation space for residents, supporting community interaction beyond the classroom. The proposed closure of James John and relocation of the Spanish immersion programs at both schools would significantly change their roles within the community. Closing James John would remove an established community anchor from the heart of St. Johns, while relocating Sitton's Spanish immersion program and absorbing James John's neighborhood students could place additional demands on Sitton's staff and resources. Larger class sizes could also make it more difficult for parents to build meaningful relationships with teachers and staff and participate in the broader school community. Together, these changes risk weakening the connections and community resources that help sustain St. Johns as a whole.

Disinvestment and the Risk of Urban Blight

Closing a neighborhood school risks removing an active community asset and leaving a significant public property vacant or underutilized in the heart of an established neighborhood.

Vacant or poorly maintained properties can reduce pedestrian activity, affect nearby businesses, and diminish the vitality of surrounding commercial and residential areas, potentially contributing to disinvestment and urban blight.

These risks reinforce the need for PPS to prioritize alternatives that keep neighborhood schools open, rather than treating the future use of a vacant or underutilized school property as a problem to address after a closure. The potential loss of an active community institution and its contribution to neighborhood vitality should be considered before decisions are made, not after the consequences have already begun.

A Better Plan for North Portland

SJNA recognizes that PPS faces difficult decisions regarding enrollment, facilities, and resource allocation. However, SJNA is concerned that the resulting proposal does not adequately account for the long-term consequences of closing established neighborhood schools. PPS should consider the broader impacts on neighborhood stability, accessibility, and community vitality and meaningfully evaluate alternatives that address district challenges without closing these valued community institutions.

SJNA respectfully urges Portland Public Schools to:

- **Meaningfully evaluate alternatives** to the proposed closures and consolidations, including options that preserve functioning neighborhood school models while addressing district-wide challenges.
- **Assess transportation and community development consequences**, including safe routes to school, increased travel distances, commercial activity, and the long-term effects of vacant or underutilized school properties.
- **Demonstrate and communicate consistency with PPS's Equity Lens and Guiding Principles**, including consideration of whether the proposals would disproportionately burden historically underserved communities.
- **Engage affected neighborhoods before final decisions are made**, provide a more sufficient opportunity for information to be exchanged and create a meaningful opportunity for community concerns to inform the outcome.

The future of neighborhood schools is closely connected to the long-term health of the communities they serve. SJNA urges PPS to pursue a comprehensive approach that addresses district needs while protecting neighborhood stability, equitable access, and the vitality of North Portland.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

St. Johns Neighborhood Association