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## Activist targets Multnomah County homeless school

*Questions raised about educating kids out of the mainstream*

BY JENNIFER ANDERSON

*The Portland Tribune, Jan 23, 2007, Updated Jan 23, 2007 (4 Reader comments)*

**One of Portland's longtime activists on homeless issues is calling for Multnomah County to stop funding the private, nonprofit Community Transitional School, the city's only separate school for homeless children.**



DENISE FARWELL / PORTLAND TRIBUNE  
Kansas Boshell (front), 5, and classmates (far left to right) Marques Paine, 5, True Mitchell, 7, and Baileigh Jamero, 6, listen while being read to at the Community Transitional School.

Chuck Currie, the interim minister at Parkrose Community United Church of Christ, is known as a fierce advocate for the homeless who has served on numerous local and national homeless coalitions and ran the Goose Hollow Family Shelter from 1998 to 2003 before joining the seminary.

Last week, Currie sent a request to the county board of commissioners to end its \$52,000 grant toward the Community Transitional School unless it produces test results to show that its students are performing at the same level as homeless students in the local public schools.

He raises a debate that's been percolating here and across the country for

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the past decade: whether homeless children should be educated in mainstream public school classrooms, or separately in programs such as the Community Transitional School, which started in 1990 at the Portland YWCA.

Currie strongly believes that separate is unequal and kids are best served in the mainstream. He doesn't think the government should help fund this school since Congress passed legislation in 1998 that said no school district could subsidize a school for homeless children unless it received an exemption from the law.

As a new board member of the National Coalition for the Homeless, Currie said he played a large role in getting the legislation passed.

As a result, Portland Public Schools pulled its funding, which was about a third of the school's budget, of the Community Transitional School.

That year, the Community Transitional School received its nonprofit status, and it has subsisted since then on the support of the county (for about 10 percent of its budget), foundation grants, churches, civic groups and individual and corporate donors including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which chipped in \$300,000 so the school could secure a permanent location.

Since 1998, the debate has mostly been quiet here; the biggest challenge for the Community Transitional School has been to find a stable location, after problems with its lease agreements caused it to move five times.

Most recently it moved to the Mt. Tabor Presbyterian Church at 5441 S.E. Belmont St. Next summer the plan is to break ground on a new building at 6507 N.E. Killingsworth St.

But now, Currie is stirring up the philosophical and legal debate again, his latest ammunition being a recent report that cast doubt on the performance of students at the Thomas J. Pappas School in Arizona, the nation's largest school for the homeless.

The Pappas school was created in 1990 and consists of three schools serving 1,100 students in Phoenix and Tempe. The report, cited in the Dec. 6 issue of the Arizona Republic newspaper, revealed that Pappas students scored worse than homeless kids in the public schools in both math and reading at every grade level.

Currie fears the Community Transitional School could be providing a subpar education, and would rather see the county direct its funds to the public schools.

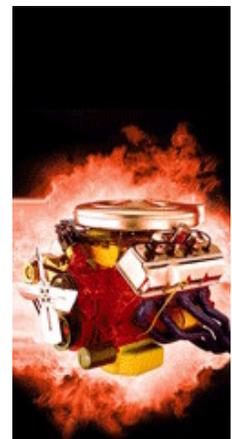
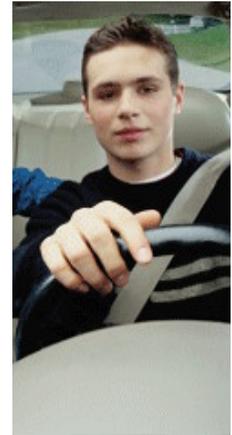
Most of the city and county's homeless children attend public schools; at last count, Portland Public Schools served 1,500 homeless kids, many receiving mentoring, school supplies and other support from an afterschool program called Project Return.

**Wheeler gets involved**

Cheryl Bickle, a teacher and principal at the Community Transitional School, says the choice should be left for parents to make.

"It would be one thing if parents were ordered to send their children here, but if parents are given a choice, I don't understand (the criticism)," she said. "I think the \$52,000 the county gives us each year is well-spent."

Since her school is private it does not need to participate in standardized tests, and she doesn't think it should have to. She says tests can't measure everything a child learns in school, anyway – like the character-building she says her teachers instill in the small learning environment.



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County Chairman Ted Wheeler considers the issue an important policy discussion and has set up a meeting between himself, Bickle and Currie on Jan. 31. Until then, he isn't making any decisions.

"I have a personal connection to this issue," he said. "It's important to me. For seven years, I volunteered at the Goose Hollow Shelter. I had the chance to talk to the children who use these programs. I understand how important their needs are. I think everybody is well-intentioned here."

Bob Durston, who formerly advised Commissioner Erik Sten on various homeless policies, including the city's 10-year Plan to End Homelessness, also was diplomatic.

"Both systems need to prove they're serving the community well," he said. "This debate has been raging in the community for several years. It's time to show empirical data to decide which is best for the kids."

### **Students from across area**

At the Community Transitional School on Friday, kids wolfed down their ravioli lunches so they could get a slice of the chocolate cake being served to celebrate those with January birthdays.

The school serves 70 kids each day in preschool through eighth grade, about 225 each year. Just under half come from the city of Portland; the rest represent six school districts in the metro area.

All come from high-poverty families, and just over half are minorities. They receive free transportation to and from school, school supplies, clothing, meals, tutoring, field trips and health checks.

The school receives about \$21,000 in federal Title I services (a part-time teacher and some supplies) since it has about 25 percent to 35 percent of students who are behind academically.

For 9-year-old Ryan Haag, the school has been his rock. He now lives at his grandmother's house with his mom, who is trying to get a job as a cook. His classmates live in motels, in parking lots, in shelters and at friends' homes. Two brothers have moved 14 times since September.

In all, Haag says, he's been to 5,020 schools during his lifetime, which has been tough because "I leave behind everything I ever loved."

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*The city's third annual Project Homeless Connect, which connects homeless adults with social services, is set for 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Tuesday at Memorial Coliseum. Last year, the event served 900 homeless adults.*

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