

# Schools for the City Campaign Literature, 1973

*By Schools for the City Committee*

This pamphlet encouraged Portland voters to support a ballot measure that would have increased temporarily the tax base of Portland Public School District, beginning during the 1972-1973 school year. Schools for the City Committee, a grass-roots organization of over 400 members, sponsored the campaign literature.

In the early 1970s, schools in Oregon faced severe funding problems. Schools in Portland were no exception. Although the district benefited from a relatively high property tax base compared to elsewhere in the state, Portland's school tax rate was lower than other districts in the metropolitan area such as Lake Oswego and Beaverton. Budget shortages forced the Portland School Board to cut the 1971-1972 school year by twenty days.

As soon as the school board announced the tax levy proposal, the Schools for the City Committee organized to support it. Among the organization's primary concerns was urban decay—they feared the city's more prosperous families would flee to the suburbs in search of better education if the situation was not addressed. Committee members understood their challenge—similar measures failed three times the previous year.

Defending itself against accusations that the district was financially irresponsible, the committee touted Portland's effective budgeting methods and reported that a misuse of operating funds was not to blame. Still, Mrs. David Newhall, co-chairperson of the committee, conceded that the measure was a "three-year Band-aid," not a permanent solution. The school measure in Portland came one year before the McCall Plan, a tax measure initiated by Governor Tom McCall that would have restructured the state's tax system to increase state funding of schools and to lower property taxes. Newhall maintained that the Portland measure was necessary to see the city through a time of readjustment should the McCall Plan pass.

With 45.7 percent of the vote, School Measure #21 did not pass at the primary election in Portland. As a result, the school board cut the budget by 8.8 million dollars. The board cut the district's kindergarten program in half, eliminated 508 positions—including 142 teaching posts, reduced the school year by five days, cancelled summer school, and cut back on athletics, counseling, and support services. The episode serves as an example of one moment in a long struggle to find stable funding for public schools.

**Further Reading:** Walth, Brent. *Fire at Eden's Gate: Tom McCall & the Oregon Story*. Portland, Ore., 1994.

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