

**THE FOLLOWING TESTIMONIES HAVE BEEN SUBMITTED FOR THE PUBLIC
RECORD BUT THE SPEAKER WAS UNABLE TO ATTEND IN PERSON TO READ
THEIR TESTIMONY.**

Hello,

Thank you for receiving comments for the August 26th meeting regarding the Facilities Utilization Plan.

Statement Against the Proposed Facilities Utilization Plan

We stand firmly against the proposed Facilities Utilization Plan, which seeks to reshape schools that have been thriving under their current structures. While the district's approach is rooted in a desire for equality through uniform planning, we believe this method may not achieve true equity for all our schools and students.

Equality aims to provide the same resources to everyone, but equity requires us to meet each school where it is, aligning resources to those that need support the most, and reducing disruptions for schools that are already thriving. The one-size-fits-all approach proposed in the current plan is not only neglectful of the unique needs of individual schools but also risks causing unnecessary disruptions in places where students and staff are succeeding under the current system.

We believe that a more nuanced approach is necessary—one that is data-driven and responsive to the specific needs of each school community. By using the data at our disposal, we can develop a solution that supports struggling schools with the resources they need to succeed, while allowing those that are thriving to continue doing so without interference.

Let us rethink this plan to ensure that it results in an outcome that is not only just and sustainable but also relevant to the diverse needs of our district. We owe it to our students, staff, and communities to create a plan that truly supports every school, not just on paper, but in practice.

Signed,

Dr. Bee Schindler, on behalf of my family and child who attend Colfax K-8

Dear PPS Board,

I am writing as I cannot be at the meeting to be held discussing the facilities utilization plan and would like to share feedback. moved to Pittsburgh in 2017 and have two daughters. and we have always valued the public school system and decided to purchasing a house in the Colfax school district nearly 5 years ago after our daughter was born. My daughter will be entering Kindergarten in 2025 and I am *very concerned* for the change proposed and the impacts it will have.

First of all, with the proposed changes, our children will be assigned to Greenfield or Minadeo schools, which are both 1.2/1.4 miles away, which leaves us ineligible for bussing and would mean a much longer walk (which would impact time able to work) and would entail crossing over a highway and less safety. Not only does breaking the school apart create a divide in the community but decreases safety for our (and other) kids..

When we toured Colfax last year, the robust parent-teacher organization shared that what they see as the benefit of Colfax is precisely that it is K-8, building a strong network of involved parents and engaged students.

There is plenty of research showing the negative impacts of changing schools from 5th to 6th grade, so this feels like it is very much *not* a student-focused decision.

If the facilities plan does end up rearranging Colfax into a 6-8 school, we will be looking to move outside the city, which will also impact commute times, family life and as more and more families do this, the tight-knit community as a whole will be impacted. We would be heartbroken to have to do this as this is where our families, friends and my husband's job and my business is.

I do **not** support this change, as Colfax is a well-attended school. I am concerned with what I am hearing from other parents of children of the same age as we have a year to decide about moving location before starting kindergarten and know this will have a devastating impact on students, families and the community at large.

Please consider keeping this excellent school as it is, for the students. The stress they will feel if their families are stressed and are forced to make a choice about moving is not necessary.

Thank you,

Liz Marino

Parent, Community Member, Business Owner

August 26, 2024

Dear Board Members & Dr. Walters,

I wanted to first extend my appreciation and acknowledgement for the August 13-15 Building Bridges Professional Development sessions I attended. It was highly informative and connected to additional reading material I have found beneficial to my practice. I encourage you to read Donalyn Miller's, ***The Book Whisperer*** and ***Who's Doing the Work?*** by Jan Miller Burkins and Kim Yaris. Both connect to themes prevalent in last week's workshops.

Furthermore, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Michelle Srednicki. I have been with the district since 2009 and have been an ESL teacher at Arsenal Elementary for the past ten years. I have been amazed with our ESL program, staff, and administration who have dedicated their efforts and expertise to make this school thrive. I was in a bit of a shock to hear of the proposed termination of our elementary school. However, I am also curious as to why the consultants were not prepared or able to share information about what would happen to our ESL elementary program.

We are the **ONLY ESL Elementary school** in the district to be eliminated and divided into two schools, Liberty and Sunnyside, and neither have ever served as an ESL center. I am having difficulty understanding why the ERS consultants were unable to answer questions about our significant ESL population. I strongly advise you to look more deeply into what has been going on at our elementary school, particularly our ESL population and enrollment over the years.

Please take the time to look at the **data** and you will see that our ELLs make up a **huge** portion of our enrollment at Arsenal which is why we have so many ESL teachers in comparison to other ESL Elementary schools. We have five ESL teachers employed at Arsenal Elementary. Beechwood K-5 Elementary has four ESL teachers, Concord K-5 Elementary School has three, and Greenfield K-8 has two. One year, *ESL was 51% of our entire school population!* For the past several years, we have had an overabundance of ESL students enrolling throughout almost every single month of the ten-month school year. Our elementary school has been an ESL center for **nineteen years!** Our ESL teachers have met or exceeded language proficiency benchmarks for our ESL students every year. Where are you planning to place these students when you have everything already in place at Arsenal Elementary? How is this going to affect the Somali and Bantu communities in the Northview Heights area and beyond?

I truly love teaching at Arsenal Elementary. I drive an hour to and from the school daily and enjoy working with the diverse population, staff, and administration who accommodate for our language learners "**always, in all ways**". These students need a

great amount of support because they are learning both the language and content. They also need staff who are educated and experienced to teach them. ESL students consist of one of the student groups who need the most but are easily overlooked or given the least. They are also a group of students whose families may not have the language accommodations needed to understand what is happening to their school or how they can advocate for their children. How are we going to ensure equity and that their voices are heard?

On a final note, *as our PPS population continues to decline, **our ESL population is rising year after year.*** Now is the time to do what is right for our English language learners and their families, so they will continue to choose PPS as a premier ESL district for many years to come!

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Michelle

Srednicki

Good evening, Superintendent Walters, Board Members, and ERS representatives.

Greetings to you all on this first day of the 2024-2025 academic year! Much gratitude to each of you as you consider what is best for our city's children and indeed the future of the entire city. I'm writing with a few comments and questions regarding the facilities utilization plan as currently presented.

Statewide legislation changes – In 2023, Pennsylvania's Commonwealth Court ruled that the state's public education funding formula is inequitable and unconstitutional and tasked Governor Shapiro and the state Legislature to seek solutions over the coming years. In June of this year, the House passed legislation to reduce the amount of money to cyber charter schools and changed the funding formula for public schools. Given that charter schools alone cost the District \$146 million per year, or more than 20% of the annual budget, even a small adjustment would be extremely beneficial to the District's overall bottom line. Can we not expect that at least some financial relief is already en route?

Conflicting perspectives – Much of the proposed plan hinges on the belief that stand alone middle schools are preferred to the K-8 model. However, the research still indicates the K-8 model is superior and does a far better job in promoting student achievement and character development. Please help us understand why the District is preferring a model that is counter to the copious research available.

Transportation – Given the bus staffing shortages and nearly \$40 million/year expense of bussing the city's students, does the current proposal increase or decrease the number of students requiring bussing? How would this impact the overall line item for transportation? And how is the average ride time affected?

Plans for abandoned buildings – What plans does the District have for any abandoned school buildings? While it's perfectly normal for school districts to expand and contract from one decade to the next, a sold property is gone forever. Furthermore, selling a former neighborhood school building/property could be extremely attractive to a charter school, whose opening would only further challenge the health of the District.

Community hub – There has been a decent amount of conversation regarding the District's wish to be a community hub, but there was no mention of how this might play out in the current proposal. It would seem that the loss of so many building actually restricts the opportunity for this to happen.

Facilities are indeed a very important part of our school district, but it is but one piece of a much larger puzzle. I look forward to hearing more from you in the coming weeks and months and hope to hear more about the above-mentioned items.

Gratefully,
Ashley Hezel
(Mom to three PPS students)

As a PPS parent I have a lot of concerns related to the initial proposal that was recently submitted to the board. There are also parts of the proposal that I agree with and think are great ideas.

I understand change is hard to accept and there will be challenges with any type of change. However, I also understand changes need to happen to schools within the district. I just feel the currently proposed changes are too dramatic and negatively impact the district overall.

Concerns:

- The total number of schools proposed to close
 - Including some of the more desirable and better performing schools
 - Impacting many different communities, students, families, and staff
 - Changing the dynamics and culture within all the schools
- The elimination of the magnet programs (except in a limited number of situations)
 - Reducing the number of school options for the students and family

Suggestions:

- Keep the current magnet programs in place
 - Use them as a model/foundation for the feeder schools
 - Build off the success currently in place
 - Versus eliminating it and starting over
- Expand the magnet programs throughout the district
 - Make new programs to provide more opportunities for all
 - Allow better access to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math
- Review and reduce the list of schools proposed to close
 - Make sure to take into account the different impacted communities, students, families, and staff
 - Better understand how these proposed changes impact the dynamics and culture within all schools
 - All of this is better understood by our families, students, staff, and the board compared to an outside consultant

Agree:

- Aligning schools to all be K-5, 6-8, and 9-12

- Makes sense to have all the school aligned by the same grades
 - Eliminates there being a wide range of ages in different schools
- Using the magnet programs as a model for other schools

Thank you,

Justin Beers

My name is Chris Voltz and I reside at 1155 Shady Avenue (15232) with my wife Jennifer and our two children, Thatcher (3rd Grade) and Delphine (Kindergarten). When deciding where to raise our young family, we stayed in the city and purchased our home on Shady Avenue specifically so that we could send our kids to Colfax from Kindergarten through eighth grade. We are not alone in making this decision.

Our son Thatcher has attended Colfax for 1st Grade and 2nd Grade and, overall, we have loved Colfax. It has an active and involved PTO and great teachers, our kids have made friends with a diverse group of kids, we all take pride in our neighborhood school. As an added bonus, for families with two working parents (like us), kids are able to take “the walking bus” to the JCC for after school care. It seems that Colfax K-8 is objectively successful too. According to US News and World Reports, Colfax is the [top PPS elementary school](#) and 2nd best middle school.

We have carefully reviewed the Facilities Utilization Plan and it appears that, with respect to the Allderdice feeder system, the District is destroying a neighborhood school (Colfax K-8) without justification. I understand that the District is facing declining enrollment and believes that it needs to close schools (personally, I think actions like the Facilities Utilization Plan will lead to more school closures, because, by considering the elimination of Colfax K-8, PPS has let everyone in the area (or thinking about moving to the area) know that they should not rely on PPS). Importantly, even accepting the premise that the District needs to close schools, under the plan, not one building in the current Allderdice feeder system will be closed, so the necessity to save costs by closing buildings does not exist. Colfax (K-8), Greenfield (K-8), Mifflin (K-8) and Minadeo (K-5) will feed into Allderdice HS before and after the proposed reorganization. Sterrett (6-8) will become a feeder to Westinghouse HS. The only goal of this plan is to eliminate the K-8 model and change all schools to K-5, 6-8 and 9-12. Those who attended Colfax would go to either Greenfield or Minadeo for K-5 and Mifflin K-5, Greenfield K-5 and Minadeo K-5 would then attend Colfax 6-8 and then that group would attend Allderdice HS. Since this realignment does not close any buildings, the assumption would be that this realignment would increase educational opportunities for children. What data does the District have that this change will benefit the students currently attending Colfax K-8?

My concern is that the District is proposing to destroy an established neighborhood school system without justification. Can the District state that those currently attending Colfax K-8 will benefit from these changes? I don't think the District can make such a statement, for the following reasons:

1. **Lost sense of Community.** Children attending Colfax live and play near Colfax even when it is not in session. It sits directly opposite a wonderful park (Blue Slide Park) that is used year round. We use it to play Squirrel Hill baseball in the summer and for sled riding in the winter. Grandparents take kids to the Blue Slide Market after school for a treat. Almost

every other school district in the area sends kids to local schools for elementary school and then consolidates for middle school and high school. Why is PPS even considering sending Squirrel Hill/Shadyside/Point Breeze elementary school students away from their homes and over a highway to another neighborhood?

2. **No Teacher input.** Has the District consulted with the Colfax Administration/Teacher whether this change would improve the educational opportunities for the children currently attending Colfax? Do the elementary school teachers know where they will be reassigned? As a volunteer, I have helped chaperone trips to the Frick Museum, Blue Slide Park and the Environmental Center on Beechwood Boulevard. Will those opportunities still be available if this plan goes forward? It seems certain that K-5 will no longer be able to walk to these events any longer.
3. **Unnecessary - Colfax already is K-5 and 6-8.** Have any teachers or administrators complained about the Colfax K-8 model? Colfax is already two schools, with the elementary (K-5) kids in the older part of the building and the older kids (6-8) in the newer portion of the building. Why change anything? If the District needs to get rid of the K-8 model, then ID old Colfax as Colfax K-5 and the newer portion of Colfax as Colfax 6-8.
4. **Overreliance on Busing when Busing is Scarce.** Both Greenfield and Minadeo are on the other side of 376, so walking and taking a bike to school would no longer be an option. So the District will need to rely on busing and District is struggling to provide busing as it is. When we enrolled our son in first grade, due to post-Covid busing and driver shortages, the District moved the walking threshold from 1 mile to 1.5 miles. In other words, we lost the ability for our children to take a bus to/from school. The District has not reduced the threshold in the last two years back to one mile, so I assume busing remains scarce. In fact, though we aren't on a bus, as of last year, we frequently got messages that the "Blue bus was running late" or the "White bus wasn't going arrive today - - all kids would have an excused absence." How can the District be confident that it is going to be able to provide busing to the Squirrel Hill/Shadyside/Pointe Breeze children on a consistent and reliable basis to Greenfield? Is the District considering issuing these kids PAT/PRT bus passes to provide required transportation?
5. **Losses to Private School.** Has the District investigated how many students would elect to attend private school if this plan moves forward? Has the District considered the increased costs of busing children to private schools if this plan goes forward.
6. **Afterschool Care.** As noted above, for working parents, the JCC provides a "walking bus" from Colfax to the JCC. Did the District consult with the JCC when developing the plan? If not, has the District worked with the JCC to ensure that this would continue, moving forward?

In short, we chose to move to the city and send our kids to PPS based on the understanding that we would be able to send our kids to two neighborhood schools, Colfax and Allderdice. Frankly, we feel like the rug has been pulled out from under us and, after reviewing the proposal, still do not

understand why. We respectfully request that the Board publicly announce, as soon as possible, that the Facilities Utilization Plan will not move forward with respect to Colfax and the Alderdice feeder system.

Thank you for your consideration,

Chris

I am a PPS parent and teacher.

Four thoughts on the proposals from ERS.

Reflecting on the proposals from ERS, I have four main thoughts I would like to share with the board.

1) This plan is not actually forward looking. It doesn't investigate why families are leaving PPS nor address those needs. It presumes a continued loss of enrollment rather than focusing on what would entice families to stay in the district. I was disturbed by comments of board members during the meetings, who seemed to feel that the departure of families is a lost cause. The "intentionally bold" ideas needed to reinvigorate our schools may have been hidden in that presentation (community schools, expanded CTE and arts, etc), but the headline that many families walked away with was that our schools are failing, underfunded, and likely to close, serving to further push families away.

Additionally, we know that when we shut down neighborhood school buildings, charters move in. We've seen it happen with ECS and Catalyst Academy, among others. I can think of many neighborhoods in the East End that no longer have public elementary schools within walking distance--that seems likely to increase under this new plan. It seems like the board has forgotten that when we allow charters to expand, we're not just losing students to those schools, we're losing funds.

2) The narrow focus on facilities ignores so much. We all know that bigger schools and larger classroom populations are not necessarily better, and the push to consolidate seems to be coming from a financial concern. If that is the case, what other areas could be audited? Administrative overhead? Non-school buildings like Bellefield? Bloated technology and consultant contracts? There are other opportunities for cost-savings that could benefit our schools that seem to have been completely ignored throughout this process. Additionally, the plan seems to come with very little knowledge of school climate, culture, or patterns. How can we amend this process to make sure that what is going right in some schools is preserved and celebrated?

3) Neighborhood schools are not a magical solution to equity. Deep investment will be needed to make every neighborhood school a destination that parents feel excited about sending their children too. My fear is that closing schools is easy, but funding renovations and program expansions is hard. Both parts of the plan need to be in place before we move forward as a district.

While I agree that school choice via the magnet system has created its own problems (and I am all for a reassessment of our magnet policies), we do not operate in a vacuum. School choice will exist whether our district is the one providing the options or not. We have to provide enticing options for all families through the creation of healthy safe spaces, academic rigor across the city, and culturally relevant curricula that welcomes children. We have to assure families that we will be open when they need us, and expand our childcare options for when we are not. We need to be there, and this plan seems to be diminishing our presence in the community instead.

4) There are some potential positives. As previously mentioned, reassessing magnet admissions policies is a useful and necessary step to improving equity. Reinvigorating neighborhood schools is an exciting prospect--as a parent I know that many of our family friends are overwhelmed by navigating the choices in the system and would like things to be simpler. Updating our facilities is also important, and I'm still waiting (and hoping) to see how the district is going to implement its commitment to climate change action when making these renovations and improvements.

--

Kate Harris

August 26th, 2024

Dear Dr. Walters and Board of Education,

Thank you for all of your hard work towards a plan of district reorganization with lots of stakeholders and interested parties.

I was able to make time to attend two of the listening/feedbacks sessions this summer and have a couple of points that were either unanswered or where information was still being pursued during the sessions.

1) At both of sessions, the question was raised of why are people leaving the school district either to charter or private schools and/or moving away? While pursuing this question may seem like a secondary interest, these families are indeed stakeholders and their perspective will help us understand what is needed to retain and perhaps reengage city families and students.

2) I loved the idea of making our schools community hubs as identified as one of the nine factors to be considered in the decision of how to move forward with our school district; however, the initial proposal does not mention these additional factors of consideration. If the facility plan is trimmed as proposed, how can the remaining buildings be used for anything apart from education?

- In terms of community hubs, aligning lower occupancy schools with a pediatric practice might also give that school access to a nurse, which is one position that has been cut.
- One of the schools in the Hill District which is proposed for closure is already home to a private pre-school. In this case, not only are you proposing to close the school, but doing so jeopardizes the preschool as well –the very example of school as community hub that is desired.
- There are many non-profits in Pittsburgh which provide out-of-school time programming and the like to enrich and engage the community. Have they been consulted about space preferences?

3) Lastly, I never heard what was included in the school modernization and I fear in the calculations are comparing 100 year-old schools to the new builds of Mount Lebanon or North Hills where they have space and a larger tax base that allows them to rebuild each generation.

Thank you for your consideration of these points.

Sincerely,
Michael Hezel