



Pittsburgh Public Schools Public Hearing Testimonies
October 21, 2024

#1

Julia Dixon-Ernst

Parent

Not Attending



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#2

Geoffrey Dixon-Ernst

Parent

Not Attending



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#3

Elizabeth Camber

Parent

#4

Shirley Hill

Retired PPS Teacher

I have followed the public hearings regarding the unfair treatment of former Montessori teacher Ms. Stephanie Lapine by principal Kellie Meyer. Throughout my 41-year career with PPS, I too was subjected to toxic principals like her. In December 2023, Ms. Stephanie Lapine was removed from her classroom by Kellie Meyer. After many attempts by parents/guardians, Kellie Meyer did not offer an explanation for Ms. Stephanie Lapine's removal. Ms. Stephanie Lapine was cleared in February 2024 but was "conveniently transferred" to another school. Why was Ms. Stephanie Lapine not reinstated at Montessori? Why is Kellie Meyer not being held accountable for her unfair treatment of Ms. Stephanie Lapine (the only lead black teacher)?

Carrick High School has a very small percentage of black teachers. "Study after study shows achievement among students of color rise if they are taught by a teacher who looks like them. Yet the percentage of Black teachers working in public schools is around 7% nationwide." (Word In Black, July 5, 2024) **BLACK STUDENTS AT CARRICK MATTER!!**

Computer Applications should be a mandatory business elective class for all incoming freshmen. During my time at Carrick, some English teachers, CTE ITL, and CTE Director have indicated the importance of this class. Freshmen are not getting the necessary skills in middle school. When it is time to do a project, some of them are lost. While at Carrick, I have helped students many times navigate through the necessary software to complete their projects. Quite often teachers require students to do projects that utilize Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. These skills are beneficial to students beyond high school.



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#5

Chui Ong

Parent



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#6

Karen Sloan

Parent



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#7

Tamra Mitchell

Guardian

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#8

Cristina Ruggiero

Parent

I am here today as parent of a student athlete who plays girls soccer at Allderdice and to ask the Board to investigate why the superintendent and the Director of Athletics for PPS school district were deficient in doing their jobs by failing to protect and represent PPS student athletes' ability to compete meaningfully in soccer, tennis and baseball in PIAA (Penn Interscholastic Athletics Association). I ask that the Board hold the superintendent and the Director of Athletics accountable for failing to provide these students with the same meaningful, competitive athletic opportunities other student's have in the district, due to a PIAA constitutional change: **"Teams from member schools are eligible to participate in PIAA District Championship tournaments and Contests only in the PIAA District in which they are a member"** which effectively prohibits PPS schools (district 8) to participate in leagues of other districts and their post season tournaments. This rule passed in May 2023, went into effect July 2023. However this rule was only recently enforced midway this fall season for both soccer and tennis, effectively wiping away their records and efforts this year. We were made aware of this only because a challenge was brought by another school for having Allderdice's tennis players participate in WPIAL this month, enforcing the rule, yet no coach or team knew about this rule prior to the school year. It was only after this incident did the Director apologize for not taking action or providing information to any PPS schools, coaches, students or parents. What you might not know is that the PPS Athletic Director is on the board of the PIAA, attends every Board meeting and was first aware of this issue almost 2 years ago. When this amendment was first proposed at the Board's December 2022 meeting, it allowed for an exception which read: **"Teams from member schools are eligible to participate in PIAA District Championship tournaments and Contests only in the PIAA District in which they are located under this Section. Teams from District 8 may participate in District Championship Tournaments of District 7 if agreed to by these two Districts."**

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As soon as this issue came to the Board, she should have notified the district, understood what the implications were for student athletes in the district, and raised the alarm about the impact this would have for PPS teams. And yet, this amendment was edited again, taking out the exception, for section 8 and was unanimously approved by the Board, including the PPS' Athletic Director's vote on February 1st, 2023. And was unanimously approved again by the Board on Feb 22nd, and finally approved statewide by May 2023. At any point did she do something to prevent this rule from being implemented or find a resolution that would ensure that PPS students could have a competitive schedule and postseason? No, because no one knew what was happening.

Now there are substantial consequences due to her lack of action or communication that do not appear they are being addressed with urgency. This year, as noted, the Allderdice Boys team could have engaged in the playoffs of WPIAL district 7 – the most competitive district in the area. Yet, they were banned halfway through their season. The only meaningful record they have now is with ONE OTHER team in the CITY league district – with Obama in Division 3 (based on enrollment of boys in the school) to play meaningful competition. The Allderdice Girls in Section IV- due to higher girl enrollment in the school, have NO OTHER TEAMS in their division in the city league (Section 8) to play competitive games with next year. The Director claims they will be able to create an independent schedule for these teams at Allderdice and Obama for next year, but please understand, if these games are scheduled, they are likely not to be home games where parents and friends can see them play. No high school is going to schedule home and away games with a school in which those games are meaningless to their record and don't impact their section standings and record. Each High School only schedules one or two 'non section' games for their entire schedule. That means that at best Obama and Dice will have a handful of games to play, and those other schools will demand that they will be home games, because Pine Richland will not make the hour trip into the city just to play a non-section game. These kids will be deprived of an opportunity to play in the city, in front of their

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friends and family. If you don't think this is possible it already happens with Brashear, whose boy's soccer team already suffers this fate, plays an independent schedule and had NO HOME GAMES this season. This will happen to Allderdice and Obama's girls' and boys' teams next year in soccer, tennis and boy's baseball. These students deserve to have the same opportunities as other student athletes like those who play football or basketball. They put in hours of practice and effort and for them not being able to perform in front of their classmates, friends and family like other teams in the district, is terrible. The district is effectively discriminating against them simply because other city schools do not field teams in these sports. These students at Brashear, Obama and Allderdice deserve to have meaningful schedules and competitions and the opportunity to play at home in Cupples just like other sports. I ask again for you to hold the Superintendent and his Director of Athletics responsible for letting the students down this season and demand that they act ensuring they get the same opportunities as other student athletes at other schools in this district. That is their responsibility and yours, to ensure all students have the same opportunities in this district no matter which school they attend, whether it be Westinghouse, Obama or Dice, but as of now that is not the case nor will it be next year, as it stands. Thank you.



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#9

David Abt

Student



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#10

Lauren Abt

Parent



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#11

Allison Sharrow

Parent



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#12

Vanessa Dagavarian

Parent



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#13

Jessica Neiss

Parent, Organization



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#14

Addison Klein

Student



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#15

Kimberly Neely

Parent



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#16

Mindy Payne

Teacher / Staff, Parent



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#17

Sarah Zangle

Parent



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#18

Jacob Tanenbaum

Parent

Not Attending



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#19

Jing Luo

Parent



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#20

Rachel Alexander

Teacher / Staff



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#21

Kara Britanik

Parent



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#22

Lily Allman

Student



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#23

Valerie Webb-Allman

Parent, Community Member



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#24

Jacob Boyce

Teacher / Staff



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#25

Cheree Charmello Andrews

Teacher / Staff



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#26

Janay Gilmore

Organization – Maxim Healthcare



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#27

Netta Bell

Parent

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#28

Tae Min Hong

Parent

Title: Build on success, not shatter communities: Colfax and Gifted Center

Hello, my name is Tae Min Hong. I am a resident of North Squirrel Hill and a father of a 3rd grader at Colfax. I would like to make a comment regarding the proposed Education Resource Strategies, the ERS plan. I thank the Board for allowing me to speak. We can all see that the Board has a difficult task in front of them. The looming budget issues—should no change is made—seems to have precipitated a bold do-over plan to make things right. My comment on the plan is twofold, one regarding the Gifted Center and the other regarding Colfax. They both have a common theme -- I believe that one needs to build on success, not break them up. Build on success to achieve equity and excellence, as well as foster a community of people who accomplish those goals.

The Gifted Center is a program that takes place at Greenway Classical Academy, in the West End of the city. Students from all over the district take the bus, once a week, away from their usual environment, to experience programming that is not available to them at their local school. Regardless of what school you come from, you participate in the same courses, the same Science Fair, and learn from the same teachers. The centralized location promotes a unified excellence and creates a sense of community regardless of where in the district you are coming from. In contrast, the proposed plan offers to move the programs into the local schools, where these students stay in their usual locations. Not much detail is offered in the ERS plan, but different schools have different resources available to them due to inherent differences between any two schools. I cannot see how the proposed plan makes it more equitable for the Gifted students at different schools, especially those from schools that may not have as much access to infrastructure. I urge the Board to build on the Gifted Center, not dissolve it.

Now I would like to address Colfax, where my son is in 3rd grade. Colfax is one of the more successful schools in the district and one I am familiar with. I understand that there is a budget shortfall and the motivation to split it up. But the plan proposes to send its students to four different schools. Not much detail is offered in the plan except that feeder zones may change. Percentage of students in their walk zones also change from half to a third for Allderdice feeders, a relative 70% reduction of walkers. It takes time and leadership to create a community that achieves excellence. I urge the Board to build on the Colfax community, not dissolve it.

I thank the Board for their Herculean effort in helping all of us succeed.



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#29

Michelle Srednicki

Teacher / Staff



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#30

Rita Porterfield

Parent, Community Member



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#31

Jude Porterfield

Student



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#32

April Clisura

Parent, School Bus Driver

#33

Ginger Thompkins

Teacher / Staff

“Is the proposal equitable for all children?”

Hello. I am Ginger Thompkins a 26-year PPS veteran teacher. For the last 15 years, I have served as an English Language Development teacher at Arsenal and have experienced significant benefits of working with children from all over the world and working with a very diverse group of teachers and paraprofessionals.

Arsenal Prek-5 and Arsenal 6-8 have coexisted separately and successfully in the historic landmark Arsenal building for almost 2 decades. There is enough space for both the elementary and middle school along with welcoming Woolslair’s STEAM neighborhood magnet.

Also, the district has a goal to recruit and retain Black teachers and Arsenal meets or exceeds the mark! Arsenal Prek-5’s staff is 48% African American. 50% of the homeroom teachers are black. This is very rare and possibly nonexistent in other PPS schools and didn’t just happen. It took the leadership of our current Principal, Dr. Ruthie Rea, for this to occur.

Schools closed 12 years ago, and we experienced a transition when Fort Pitt closed and we warmly welcomed the students from Garfield and Bloomfield without problems and continue to thrive as a diverse school community.

Now, I would like to suggest the following ideas for the board and Dr. Walter’s feasibility team to consider.

Is the plan resegregation? I ask this because the Somali-Bantu and Burundian families that live in Northview will live and attend school in a very segregated space. Northview closed for that very reason 12 years. As we all know that community has a history of generational poverty, crime, and violence. The children in Northview will never leave that hill and experience the joy they experience every day when they walk into Arsenal Prek-5. This is most concerning to have groups of refugees, immigrants, and some of the most marginalized Black people never experience other groups of people and expose them to something different.

Unity and a home-like community of support for diverse students and families must be preserved. That is Arsenal Prek-5. The culture of the staff to assist students is essential. Research shows representation matters. Various cultures and racial groups in one space matters. It will be devastating to break up multiple immigrant and refugee young children who come together every day and learn together. Arsenal Prek-5 is home to children who speak 18 languages, from 20 different countries. This year, we have already welcomed 60 newcomers and this is their first time in a US school. We are preparing to welcome 3 more this week alone. All schools are not prepared to engage in what it takes to bring multiple groups of children into a school with effective and comprehensive transitions and support.

Keep the facility as-is with Arsenal Middle and Arsenal Prek-5 in the same building. The facility has already allocated two separate entrances, staff, principals, and allotted rooms that work. The model



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shared in the proposal presentation for the new middle school consists of 225 students for a building that can hold well over one thousand students. That does not make sense. Arsenal Prek-5 currently has 325 children, and the enrollment continues to grow weekly. The presentation was not accurate in terms of low enrollment. I ask you to please leave Arsenal Prek-5 as-is and allow us to welcome Woolslair students and continue to serve a truly diverse student population while remaining an ELD regional site and a neighborhood STEAM magnet.



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#34

Danielle Keyes

Teacher / Staff, Community Member

#35

Patti Barilla

Teacher / Staff

Leveling Puts Students Last

Good evening, esteemed colleagues, parents, and members of our school community,

Today, I stand before you to address a pressing concern that impacts not just the academic achievement of our students, but their emotional and psychological well-being. As educators and caregivers, we know that a school is not merely a place for academic learning; it is a sanctuary where relationships are forged, trust is built, and a sense of safety is nurtured.

The importance of psychological safety in our schools cannot be overstated. It is the bedrock upon which our students' confidence, resilience, and overall well-being are built. When students feel safe—emotionally and psychologically—they are more likely to take risks in their learning, ask questions, express their thoughts, and connect with their peers and teachers.

Yet, recent decisions to level classes after six weeks of school threaten to unravel the very fabric of trust and relationships that we have painstakingly woven within our classrooms. By increasing class sizes to 30 students per classroom, moreover when 60% of a grade level is either an English Language Learner or a student in need of Learning supports, those in charge have not only affected our youngest students' academic success, but, more critically, their emotional stability.

Imagine the scenario: a classroom filled with eager learners who have built connections with their teachers and peers. Now, due to administrative decisions, these relationships were abruptly severed. The emotional distress we witnessed when students learned of these changes was heartbreaking. We saw tears, fear, and confusion—emotions that no child should have to navigate in their safe haven.

The process of leveling has been abolished by many districts across the country, notably Philadelphia Public Schools because they realized the damage they were doing to some of our most vulnerable students.

Moreover, the disruptions extend beyond the classroom walls. When students are moved to new classrooms, they face the daunting task of finding their place among established friend groups, adapting to new routines, and navigating a landscape that suddenly feels unfamiliar. For our elementary students, this can be overwhelming, causing significant emotional distress.

At Concord Elementary, we have made significant strides in supporting our diverse student body, including newcomers, English language learners, and those facing academic challenges. Our success has stemmed from our commitment to nurturing relationships and fostering trust among students and staff. We have developed systems that promote inclusion and understanding, all without the necessary mental health supports, because those too, have been stripped away by the district.

Now, the district's decision to level classes and remove vital staff disrupts this progress. It contradicts our collective mission to ensure that students come first "Always and in All Ways". By increasing class



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sizes without taking into consideration the children behind the classroom doors, we have not only jeopardized their academic success but also their mental and emotional well-being.

I truly hope we can come together as a community to end the leveling process that unnecessarily harms our students.

Together, we can ensure that our schools remain places of safety, security, and growth for all students. Thank you.



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#36

Kim Daelhousen

Teacher / Staff, Community Member



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#37

Melinda Mix

Teacher / Staff



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#38

June Wearden

Community Member



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#39

Holly Munson

Parent

#40

Lars Munson

Student

#41

Jessica Merlin

Parent

#42

Julia Miller

Parent

Good evening,

My name is Julia Miller, the mother of two brilliant boys, Roman and Chance. For them and their future, I stand before you to tell you why I am against this consolidation/closure proposal. I am a product of the Pittsburgh Public School system, attending Carmalt, West Liberty and graduating from Brashear. As our neighborhood school, my sons attend Pittsburgh Mifflin Pre-K-8 where they do amazing things to showcase what a great school we have. However, my concern is not for their educational opportunities but their ability to participate in their own education. Currently there are two busses along with a few vans that bring students to school. This past Friday at 7:30 am, we were notified that the transportation department said one of the busses would not be operating that morning, and I would like you to keep in mind school starts at 8:20, and this is not the first time that this has happened. Parents are left scrambling to figure out how their children will get to school and I am sure some do not attend because they count on the bus to get there. This has also affected our kids participation in athletics as we have had more than one sporting event cancelled due to lack of transportation. I have to admit we are one of the fortunate families within walking distance to the school which is one of the many reasons we like it. For others, they rely on busses for transportation and with the new proposal we will too. As it stands, your plan is to ship our children all over the city to other schools that would require more busses for transport! My question is, how do you plan on ensuring and securing transportation when it is not even consistent now! Transportation is a necessity.

With my children, I have experienced the issues with transportation for the Pittsburgh Gifted Center, a program planned for closure in your proposed agenda. When my oldest started going there three years ago, a Z-trip van was their transport. One of the many issues with that was the Z-trip drivers were making other stops with our children in the van causing them to be late for dismissal not to mention just how inappropriate it is to be stopping off at other locations to pick up packages while you leave students in a van unsupervised. As a result, I drive my son to and from the PGC. This past year we were finally able to get an actual bus to transport them. Now, you want to close the Gifted Center! My son and others are granted the opportunity to be in an environment where they are free to be themselves and where they can learn in a comfortable, non-judgmental setting. Being there gives them the ability to be challenged and to grow. How do you intend to integrate gifted education services into the individual schools? Because it is something I don't believe you can reproduce outside of its current form. The care that our teachers at Pittsburgh Mifflin have for the students is top notch and they along with other staff have implemented several new programs in the past few years that have changed the dynamic for the better. With all that, the teachers have a hard enough time getting through their prepared lessons without disruptions and quite honestly behavior issues in the classroom. Our children will not get the full benefit of the gifted education services unless they stay in the PGC building with the devoted teachers and staff who are there to educate them. Taking this away from them is detrimental to their education.

I am asking you, please, do not rush to vote yes to this plan. We need more consideration to these children to fully understand the negative impacts this will have on their educational needs.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Julia Miller

#43

Kelly Jones

Parent

#44

Naomi Chambers

Parent

#45

Griffin Leon

Student

#46

Asifiwe Muderhwa

Community Member

#47

Lusambo Muderhwa

Community Member

#48

Ghadah Makoshi

Parent

Not Attending

#49

Emily Sawyer

Parent, Substitute Teacher

You don't have to do this. You don't have to close schools. To be clear, you can decide to do so, but nothing makes school closures a foregone conclusion. Closing schools is a national playbook being used to undermine and destroy public education. This is not a conspiracy theory. You can look up the Broad Foundation's school closure guide, which serves as one of the playbooks for school closures disguised as "educational reforms." And you can google the frequent flyers on the consultant circuit, such as ERS, known as "school closure consultants." I know the outlook seems insurmountable, but let's talk about why school closures are not the solution we are looking for.

The metric underlying school closure processes is often the concept of "utilization." This is extremely problematic because school capacity calculations often don't take into consideration the actual needs of the school and its students AND because it ignores the underlying sabotage that created the conditions for "school failure" in the first place. Schools with so-called low enrollment have been systematically abandoned by their districts, cities or municipalities, and society through decades of underfunding and disinvestment that CREATE the facilities conditions, lack of curricular and extracurricular opportunities, and shortage of staff that lead to "under-enrollment." These schools most often serve high populations of Black and Latinx students, English learners, students with disabilities, and students whose families have also been economically disadvantaged by the same systems that underfund and close their schools! And let's be honest: the most under-utilized school is a closed school.

On top of this very shaky foundation, school closures have been shown not to save money without major layoffs. We have yet to hear how PPS will do what no other major US school district has managed to do: save significant dollars without firing teachers.

But wait, there's more: Closing schools doesn't just not save money without mass firings, it is demonstrably harmful and directly negatively impacts students outcomes. Research out of Stanford on urban school closures from 2012 to 2014 overwhelmingly found that academic outcomes suffered, particularly for low-performing students. A study from Brown University out in May of this year linked the experience of a school closure to "decreases in post-secondary education attainment, employment, and earnings at ages 25-27." This study also found that school closures negatively impact both test scores and behavior. A recent publication discussed the issue of school deserts and how uneven distribution exacerbated by closures makes "good schools" yet another resource that the privileged can hoard. Closures also force families to travel farther to get to schools that are not in their communities, making it harder to form relationships with staff, join extracurriculars, or get involved in parent organizations.

There are better ways to solve the problems plaguing PPS. First and foremost we must all get our behinds in gear to fight for increased state and federal shares of education funding starting with reforming charter school law and funding, increasing special education and compensatory ed funding, ending funding for vouchers, and having the state or federal government subsidize teacher retirement payments so districts can continue to invest in the future.

Other solutions better than closing schools include:

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- community- driven budget processes,
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- community-led assessments of building use,
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- enacting equity safeguards for school closures via School District
- policy or state law, such as community based equity audits
 - or this example from California state education code,
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 -
- and conducting a thorough audit of the district, not just a financial
- audit to check the numbers, but a real audit of the function and return on investment for all these products, curricula, technology, contracts, etc that y'all are always voting on but we never get reports on how these things are going or what we are getting
 - out of them or whether anyone is even using them.
 -

If we continue to assume and act as if school closings are inevitable, we will be playing into the hands of education privatizers who are interested in making money off our kids and ultimately don't care if all kids get educated. We know closing schools doesn't work because it has never worked.

We don't have to look any further than past closures in our own district to see that. Please don't vote for school closures just because you think you don't have a choice. That is a narrative you are being sold by people who benefit from you thinking it's inevitable. It doesn't have to be this way.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that it is the Dignity in Schools Campaign's National Week of Action Against School Pushout. Dignity in Schools works to challenge pushout in US schools and end the school to prison pipeline. Dignity in Schools envisions schools and districts that work towards preventing trauma, repairing harm and promoting healing, and reject a culture of punishment and criminalization. This year's campaign includes pushing school and district leadership to:

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- DIRECT RESOURCES TO FULLY FUND COUNSELORS, PEACEBUILDERS, RESTORATIVE
 - JUSTICE, AND POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATES.
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- ELIMINATE POLICIES AND PRACTICES CONTRIBUTING TO SURVEILLANCE,
 - MILITARIZATION AND CRIMINALIZATION OF STUDENTS.
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- STOP THE ARREST AND PUSHOUT OF BLACK STUDENTS, OTHER STUDENTS OF
- COLOR LGBTQI YOUTH HOMELESS STUDENTS, AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES.
-

References:

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[Racially Just Schools podcast episode with Dr. Terrance L Green](#)

[Cal Ed Code 41329](#)

<https://dignityinschools.org/>

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Thank you!

Emily Sawyer

(she/hers)

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"... we mistake wild curiosity and wisdom for willfulness, punish children like inmates, and then wonder why there is a school-to-prison pipeline."

-- Robin D. G. Kelley

"The cavalry is not coming from someplace else. It has to be us! It has to be you!"

-- Andre Henry

#50

Jazlynn Worthy

Parent

#51

Gady Habimana

Parent

#52

Kathleen O'Brien

Parent

#53