

Leah Hohman

Hello. My name is Leah Hohman. Thirty years ago I stood in front of the Pine Richland School Board to petition for a high school girls' soccer team and my class became the first to spend all four high school years fostering that team, developing skills and work ethic in a game I loved – some of us working toward all-section and college recruitment, all of us setting the stage for the school and its girls soccer program for years to come. It was a valuable experience that shaped a great deal of who I am today, and it was something I imagined, thirty years later, would be well in place for my children, wherever they ultimately attended. I fully agree with statements prominently displayed on the PPS Athletics Homepage – “Students who participate in athletics have been shown to have higher grade point averages, better attendance, lower dropout rates, fewer disciplinary problems, and higher graduation rates. Participation in athletics teaches teamwork, goal setting, discipline, sportsmanship, leadership, and other valuable life skills.”

Today, I'm here on behalf of my children: two daughters and two sons – all Pittsburgh Public students, all soccer lovers, student-athletes, all diligent in studies, all gritty-dig-deep-hard-workers. They are the kind of kids Pittsburgh Public wants to retain as leaders and champions of their educational experience. They share the same compassion for and dedication to academics and athletics that kids in Pittsburgh-located private schools and Pittsburgh suburb schools (like Pine Richland) do, and, beyond that, show more independence and capability than this suburb kid did. Most city kids can, after all, by the time they are 11 and 12 years old, manage public transportation, navigate the many neighborhoods of their district, and get themselves to and from school entirely on their own.

When my husband (also a Pine Richland graduate and athlete) and I decided to place roots in the Northside, we became more and more determined to stay even as we grew our family. We were already public school advocates and these kind of lessons in “real world living” really appealed to us as did the spirit of downtown, the walkability, the diversity. It was not until our eldest started inching closer to high school that we began to feel the challenges of being a well-rounded student and of experiencing some of the things that we took for granted in our own suburb high school. Currently a sophomore at Allderdice and part of the Taylor Allderdice Girls soccer team, my eldest daughter's path to that end has been full of potholes, bumps, and detours. In fact, she recently gave up two hard earned/application-heavy spots at CAPA when it became clear that after three years of middle school there and one year of high school, she could not both attend AND play high school soccer. You see, while other Capa peers were eligible to play for Obama, Rhyse's choices were limited by home address. Her home school of Perry did not have a team, and their athletics partner, Brashear, was unstable, canceling games and practices. It felt really hard to make a commitment to something that pops in and out of existence, doesn't have the support of its school or parents who are willing to lead the charge. When we reached out to the athletic director for assistance, there was no attempt to understand the dilemma that quite a few of these Pittsburgh students face. Because the home school drives team eligibility, an athlete can find themselves playing for a team for which no one else at their school of attendance plays – and accessibility, above all, becomes a huge challenge.

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In the winter of her Freshman year, my daughter applied to Taylor Allderdice's magnet program in order to find a soccer home there too. The logistics to accommodate that change are uncomfortable – it takes a couple city buses to get there or back and more to get from soccer practice, home or from school to home-games at Cupples, but this is what she (and we) were willing to do so that she could play the game, experience team play and have the kind of competition that would challenge her and help her improve. Fast forward to a few weeks ago when suddenly - after not even one complete season of play in this new, challenging effort - word reached us that the Allderdice team was not actually part of the section with which they had been scheduled, that section games this year did not count and that next year they would be relegated back to a city league – a league within which we could barely find ONE team for which she would be permitted to play. For the past 15 years, an associate WPIAL membership has provided PPS student-athletes with enhanced competition opportunities, allowing them to compete for WPIAL championships and earn individual WPIAL accolades. As our district continues to face challenges, it can no longer offer the same quality of internal competition that it once did. Forcing PPS teams out of WPIAL will undoubtedly discourage student athletes from staying in city schools. And to reference the PPS Athletics Homepage once again, student athletes tend to be the adolescents that are the most well versed in work ethic, teamwork, goal setting, discipline, leadership, etc.

I am broken-hearted over the boys Allderdice and Obama soccer teams who have had very real whiplash from an uncommunicated decision (or possibly, lack of decision) by an Athletic Director who should be making every effort to BE informed by her coaches and athletes, have a pulse on their drive, AND to likewise KEEP them informed. There are many negative implications of this surprise new standing – the removal of all city high school sports from the WPIAL section that they have been working to establish themselves in for more than a decade. The Athletic Director's argument that PPS schools, once released from WPIAL, will benefit from an easier path to States shows a fundamental misunderstanding of high school athletics in Western PA AND of athletes in general. For many sports, earning a WPIAL playoff spot and advancing in the WPIAL tournament is more meaningful than a single state playoff victory and local rivalries trump those with anonymous distant opponents. Likewise, most athletes are not looking for an easy road to a playoff game but for a hard earned one. Furthermore, forcing PPS to play an exhibition season against lower quality teams will eventually lead to a slow deterioration of the quality of Pittsburgh Public's play and a loss of Pittsburgh Public scholars.

In 2023, the PIAA's Board of Directors made the decision to eliminate the associate model from which our district and the WPIAL have both benefited. I strongly encourage the Pittsburgh Public Schools to reinstate this relationship. I would likewise urge our Board to reconsider athletics and eligibility within the district and create an athletic track for students that fosters school spirit and makes joining a team more accessible and possible. This is especially important to consider alongside the larger district changes looming in our future.

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Michelle Srednicki

Hello, my name is Michelle Srednicki. I have been an **ESL teacher at Arsenal PreK-5 for ten years.**

I wanted to start by giving some data:

Arsenal Elementary has been an **ESL center for 19 years.** Restarting a new ESL center is no easy feat. We have had the **same principal for 16 years.** Our administration and staff have the knowledge and experience for meeting the diverse needs of our English language learners. This cannot easily be replaced. ***Did you know that Arsenal PreK-5 serves almost 150 English language learners with five ESL Teachers.*** Can they all fit in Sunnyside while the new ESL center is being built? And what happens when the new building becomes available, will they need to move again?

Although it will be helpful to have a Northview Heights School for students, it will take several years to become available. In the meantime, the movement and change will create a hardship for ELL families. Why do we need to put everyone in box for sake of conforming to grade-level configurations? If we are talking about equity, there will need to be some exceptions depending on certain circumstances. It seems as if the consultants really want Arsenal to be middle school ONLY. Does it have to be? To not uproot or disrupt the lives of our most fragile families, ***could we just leave it as it is?*** Our middle and elementary operate separately anyway, they have separate principals and work as two different entities in one space. English language learners and their parents come to easily know and get used to the elementary and then seamlessly transition to middle school without having to relearn and make any major adaptations.

We need to make the exception and keep Arsenal Elementary and Middle School as it is to prevent further disturbance to our ELLs, the ones who are continuing to bolster our enrollment versus minimizing it.

Sincerely,

Michelle Srednicki

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Jennifer Frisco

Good evening,

I have worked at Arsenal Elementary for 17 years now. I have watched this school go from having 4 or 5 ESL students per grade level, to having 40 or 50% of a grade level consist of ESL students. I've watched their families trust us to teach their children as well as help their children adjust to life in a new country. This is not a responsibility that should be taken lightly and at Arsenal, it never has been.

At Arsenal, when a new student arrives, the students all want to help the new student and have them shadow them. Even if the language is different, the welcoming to our community is evident right away. Teachers make scaffolds and accommodations so that students find success in both their ESL and mainstream classes. I wish I could explain the true joy and pride we have when we see how much these students learn- watching these students know little to no English and by the end of the year having conversations with you and completing classwork in English is truly remarkable to watch. That success comes from their hard work but also comes from something else important- the teachers here at Arsenal believe that these students can learn and will do anything to make that happen.

While watching these students grow, I also know that there is a large amount of trust required from both the students and parents. Many of these families have gone through difficult times in order to come to this country and some have experienced trauma. It seems like a poor choice to have students and families who have experienced this to have to transition next year and then transition again to Northview when it is ready to receive students. If we are students first, we should make sure that some of our highest needs students do not have to endure unnecessary stress.

I understand the plan to get away from K-8 schools, but Arsenal is different. Yes, the facility holds students Prek-8, but we are two different buildings and have run this way for my entire tenure here. ESL students who arrive to our country in 5th grade, just transition to the other side of the building when they go to 6th grade; again, limiting unnecessary stress.

The best way I can summarize my thoughts is to say that Arsenal is amazing multicultural family where everyone benefits from getting to know and grow with each other. Splitting this family apart is a poor choice and my hope is that the decision will be not to do that.

Thank you for your time,

Jennifer Frisco
Arsenal Prek-5

3rd Grade Math



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Supt. Rev. James Johnson, Sr.

RELIGIOUS CENTER CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST

PENNSYLVANIA WESTERN FIRST ECCLESIASTICAL JURISDICTION

3412 Ligonier Street – Pittsburgh, PA 15201

October 20, 2024

Pittsburgh Board of Education 341 S. Bellfield Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Dear Pittsburgh Board of Education Members:

We are writing to express our deep concern regarding the proposed permanent closure of Arsenal Pre-K-5 located in the heart of Lawrenceville. As an established Pentecostal church situated five blocks from Arsenal, we have known children in our congregation who have attended Arsenal and benefited from its unique programs and multicultural environment. Arsenal is a melting pot of diverse cultures with English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, and even Swahili-speaking families. The closure of Arsenal Pre-K-5 would disrupt the educational stability for many students and splinter the rich cultural diversity that the school currently supports and provides.

The proposed decision to close Arsenal would cause challenges for families needing to send their children to schools farther away, which would also lead to increased travel times, increased transportation costs and logistical difficulties, not to mention overcrowding in other schools, further straining resources and affecting the quality of education.

Arsenal is an historic landmark and has been a cornerstone of this community since 1939, providing not only quality education but also a safe and nurturing environment for our children. Closing Arsenal would have a detrimental impact on its students, families, and the community.

We urge you to reconsider this decision and explore alternative solutions to keep Arsenal Pre-K-5 open for its current families and future generations.

Thank you for your consideration.

In His Service,

Supt. Rev. James Johnson, Sr.

Senior Pastor

Elder James Johnson, Jr.

Assistant Pastor

Peter Nero

Dear Members of the Board,

I am writing to express my concern regarding the proposed changes to the Pittsburgh Science and Technology Academy (Sci Tech), particularly the plan to split the 6-12 program into two separate campuses. As the parent of a 6th grader currently attending Sci Tech, ***I feel compelled to share how deeply unsettling this proposal is for families like mine.*** The educational experience and the unique school location we had been looking forward to and are now experiencing is unexpectedly being proposed to be taken away from us.

Sci Tech has become a special place for students with a passion for science and technology, producing outstanding academic outcomes, high test scores, and graduates who go on to attend an impressive list of colleges and universities. Its success is not by accident; the combination of rigorous academics, committed students, and its ideal location in the heart of Pittsburgh's educational and cultural district has made Sci Tech a standout institution within PPS. The school's proximity to the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, the Carnegie Museum, and the Carnegie Library provides students with access to unparalleled educational resources and experiences, which are crucial to the program's mission.

Moving the middle school grades to a separate location, just about a mile away, will effectively strip these younger students of these opportunities. The proposed new site is close to the neighborhood where the district aims to make Sci Tech a neighborhood school, but this doesn't significantly increase access for local students since they already live close to the current Sci Tech campus. The move, therefore, does not provide much additional inclusivity from a proximity standpoint but comes with significant downsides. The current location offers easy access to the very heart of Pittsburgh's educational resources, something that cannot be replicated at a new site.

Moreover, the current application-based process ensures that students are genuinely interested in science and technology and prepared for the rigor that the curriculum demands. I worry that making Sci Tech a neighborhood-based school could dilute the focus on these subjects, as not all students would necessarily be passionate about or prepared for this specialized education. This shift could place an extra burden on teachers, who may need to devote more time to bringing some students up to the required level, potentially affecting the quality of the entire program.

As parents, we chose Sci Tech specifically because of the comprehensive 6-12 experience it offers. Splitting the program risks undermining the cohesion and continuity that have contributed to its success. The suddenness of this proposed change feels particularly disheartening, as it would take away the very experience we had anticipated for our child.



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I urge the Board to reconsider this decision. The integrity and excellence of Sci Tech as a 6-12 program in its current location must be preserved for the benefit of current and future students. I believe that there are other ways to address district-wide needs without dismantling one of its most successful programs.

Thank you for your consideration of my concerns. I hope the Board will thoughtfully weigh the long-term implications of this decision on the Sci Tech community and its students.

Sincerely,

Peter Nero

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Shanekka Mason

I hope this message finds you well. I wanted to share with you a letter that a former Arsenal PreK-5 student sent me. She is currently a senior at Pittsburgh Sci-Tech. When she found out about the possible closure of Arsenal, she was disappointed and wanted to help support the future of our school. Below is her letter.

As a former student of Arsenal, I can confidently say that this school has played a crucial role in shaping the person I am today—an achiever and a dedicated hard worker. When I first arrived in America, I was placed in a grade lower than my actual academic level, and I had already been set back two years from where I should have been. This left me in classrooms with younger students, whose academic and social perspectives were quite different from mine. It was a difficult adjustment, and it had a significant impact on me until I became part of Arsenal.

The teachers, lessons, and staff everyone from the principal to the school nurse—were nothing short of amazing. To this day, I remain in contact with my school counselor, Ms. Mason, our principal, Dr. Rae, and my inspiring 5th-grade math teacher, Mrs. Martinez. They saw the potential in me both as a person and as a student. Mrs. Martinez recognized that I was not meant to be in the 5th grade but belonged in a higher grade level academically. I am forever grateful for the unwavering support and belief that Arsenal's staff had in me.

If Arsenal School were to be shut down, countless students would lose a place that not only nurtures academic growth but also provides a safe, welcoming environment for those who may feel uncomfortable elsewhere. Arsenal is not just a school—it's a family, a place where students like me can thrive, no matter the challenges they've faced.

Maha Knaineh

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Megan Ohler

To Whom It May Concern:

I wanted to share my thoughts for the district as changes are coming. I want to advocate for our ELL students and their families. It seemed that the consultant company overlooked Arsenal PreK – 5 students in their initial plan, so I'll share my considerations.

First of all, I hope that the district starts the plan with Arsenal students, families, and staff in mind. This is an opportunity to shape the district so that it's supportive of the growing ELL population in the district. If you look to meet the needs and innovations necessary for the students and families at Arsenal, it can be a great guide for other buildings and programs.

If the district intends on keeping the ELL "quadrant model", then Arsenal PreL-5 ELL students and their families should be at one building. If the district can't serve ELL students in their neighborhood schools, keep a strong hub where the staff and facilities are ready to meet the needs of the families. We can enroll large numbers of children on any given day of the school year, in any given home language. Splitting ELL support between multiple buildings, creating confusion with the enrollment process, and dividing up the limited support staff will create more challenges rather than more opportunities.

Keep innovation in mind. Look at where the ELL department is housed. Is there a way they can be in the ELL buildings, more involved in the day to day needs? We have to be ready to enroll students each and every day of school. A translation and family support room would be great to have in our building. Before closing schools, please reach out to departments and principals to see what spaces they want to keep or wish they had so the district doesn't limit itself but rather has room to grow the opportunities for our students.

Consider all the space that buildings truly need to implement all of the programs in Pittsburgh Public. Is there space for mental health workers, PSE and ELL groups, PT and OT, Speech, calm down rooms, sensory rooms, intervention spaces, school stores and incentive activities? Will all schools have spaces where children can get physical activity during indoor recess, or will some be crammed into rooms to watch a movie because it's not enough space to play? Does the building have the capacity to serve the meals on an appropriate schedule? Is there space for the Community Schools partnerships? We need spaces for the Blessings Bags, extra uniforms and shoes, and other items that our schools provide for the students. Then there are the after-school programs that need spaces so Girls on the Run, Scouts, and other enrichment programs can occur. I understand that buildings need to close, but please talk with principals about the physical spaces needed that the consultants may not have considered and don't limit the district for growth. Please be sure that the K-2 elementary rooms have both table and floor learning space for the students. Please make sure that when decisions are made for "capacity" that allow teachers to build relationships and community and not just fit a ratio. Be sure the decisions you make would be acceptable for the children in your own family.

Most importantly, the student to teacher ratio limits needs to be clear to all stakeholders. Take into consideration the English Language Learners we serve. In some rooms, teachers have students with a variety of home languages and very limited English. It's crucial that teachers are able to build a strong classroom community, and the ratios need to allow for that. We need to differentiate, use digital



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translation tools, have small group instruction, and have community circles. Those are only effective when the class sizes are reasonable and age appropriate. In the primary setting, groupings are most effective and student progress is at it's highest when there are 16 – 20 in my classroom.

Again, I urge you to examine the recommendations as an advocate for our ELL students, families, and staff. Keep equity at the forefront. Take this opportunity to design the facilities and district structure to be one that excels in meeting the needs of our growing ELL population in Pittsburgh.

Sincerely,
Megan Ohler
Arsenal PreK-5 First Grade Teacher

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Erika Gidley

Title: Give more time to consider school reconfigurations and closures in the community

Since PPS hired Education Resource Solutions last spring to optimize the PPS School Portfolio, the budget deficit for 2024 shrank from \$29.9 million to \$2.1 million. I believe there are multiple ways to meet this deficit for the 2024 budget year and beyond that do not include breaking apart school communities in the name of a streamlined school portfolio.

1. Reclaiming the school district's 0.25% share of the Earned Income Revenue Tax would easily cover the projected \$2.1 million gap and almost cover the \$29.9 million gap.
2. A budget audit of staffing at the administrative level (to be clear, not school administrators) to reduce costs and streamline the [current 30 organizational charts held by the administration](#).
3. Dedicated staffing to apply for federal and state grants that will help cover the costs of building upgrades- such as the Renew American Schools program run by the Department of Energy.

Here are some ways I do not agree with, and the district and board should avoid them.

1. Rushing into consolidating and closing school programs that will not save money or help equity in the long run. While changes need to be made, I ask the Board and Superintendent to consider other options before starting the resolution to close schools. There is a community proposal being presented tomorrow evening, I know you've been invited, and I hope you attend!
2. On a more personal note, Arsenal Elementary should not close this coming 2025 school year. First, keep the ELL community involved in every step of this process. Second, the teachers and administration at Arsenal PreK-5 are one of the most diverse in the district, with 33% black teachers to Sunnyside's 5%. Simply closing Arsenal PreK-5 creates unnecessary infighting between displaced teachers with higher seniority and new school administrations when it's not a problem they created. Lastly, current enrollment at Arsenal PreK-5 is at 300 students, depending on attendance feeders, this is much higher than the anticipated 250 student increase for the middle school. We know these numbers work for our PreK-5, the teachers and staff have a system and are organized. This creates a huge disruption for disruption's sake. If Northview Heights is redistricted away from Arsenal, Woolslair students would easily fit in the Arsenal PreK-5 building. This would keep students of all ages in our community instead of leaving a gap in elementary-aged students attending and receiving services in the Lawrenceville, Garfield, Bloomfield, and Friendship neighborhoods.
3. Impact on ELL students needs to be considered more broadly and a full plan in place before closing or moving schools. Period.

As always, thank you for your time and consideration. I hope my voice is still heard while I'm cheering for my kid's soccer team tonight.

Sincerely,

Erika Gidley

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Ghadah Makoshi

Dear School Board Members,

I regret that I am unable to attend tonight's meeting in person, and I appreciate the opportunity to submit my testimony in writing. My inability to be present is due to several challenges. I have two children attending schools in the district, and one of them undergoes dialysis every Monday afternoon, often extending into the early evening, which makes it difficult to arrive on time. In addition, I live with a disability, and as a Type 1 diabetic, I cannot always predict whether my blood sugar will remain stable enough to wait for extended periods at the school board office.

Transportation also presents a challenge. My children attend evening classes that require one parent to drop off, pick up, and wait during those times. Lastly, my professional obligations sometimes run late, making it more feasible to step away briefly for three minutes of testimony than to attend the entire hearing in person.

These barriers are not unique to me. Many parents and guardians across the district face similar challenges that prevent them from attending in-person hearings. This includes individuals with disabilities, those with evening work commitments, and those lacking reliable transportation. To disregard these realities is to prioritize those with fewer obligations and greater access, excluding families who, for various reasons, cannot physically attend but still have a vested interest in district decisions.

I am deeply disappointed in the recent unilateral decision by Gene Walker to hold school board hearings exclusively in person. Equally troubling is the lack of public vote by other board members who may have disagreed but failed to ensure the community had a say in this critical matter. Gene Walker's remark that attendance reflects the importance of an issue is dismissive and disregards the very real obstacles many families face.

If this is how families are treated when engaging with the board, I can only wonder how our students are treated in schools and considered in major decisions, such as school closures. It is unacceptable to hold our children to high standards while failing to uphold equitable practices for families. This decision lacks fairness and transparency.