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*This letter was written by Catherine V. Palmer, Ph.D.
Catherine and Mark Rauterkus, candidate for public office,
have been married since 1990.*

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108 South 12th Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15203
412-481-2540

December 14, 2005

Superintendent Mark Roosevelt
School Board, Pittsburgh Public Schools

Dear Madams and Sirs:

I write to you as a parent of two elementary school children in the Pittsburgh Public Schools and a fellow educator. I am an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh in the Department of Communication Science and Disorders. I have an undergraduate degree in elementary education, my PhD is in Audiology, I conduct research, and see patients who have communication problems due to hearing loss. I believe I am sensitive to educational needs, budget constraints, and making decision based on data due to these various roles.

My sons came home from the Gifted Center last Thursday (their favorite day of the school week) and told me that the superintendent was going to close the Gifted Center. In fact, they both produced a handout from the Gifted Center that summarized the news thus far (frequently asked questions: buses cost money, the board is voting 12/21, gifted education is mandated by law, how to be at the hearing, etc.). And then they both asked me how I could let this happen. So, out of my responsibility to my two boys, I decided to compose a letter so at least I won't have to say that I didn't even ask the important questions. I have taken several days to think about this because I have admired the process thus far in the Pittsburgh Public Schools to try to make data driven decisions rather than emotional ones. Just because I love my boys going to the Gifted Center and they love going, isn't actually a reason to keep it open. Yet, what is the reason for closing it? I will try to suggest a data driven way to approach this.

Thus far, the major decisions related to the "right-sizing" of schools in Pittsburgh have been data driven even if the formulas weren't readily available. And these data were based on educational performance. These are hard to argue with. What is the formula for considering closing the Gifted Center? It can't be performance based because these children clearly are performing. So, is it solely financially based? The only information that we have received states that this "...is not an educational decision, but a needed financial decision. By closing the building and sending all students back to their home schools the district will save \$394,449 the first year and possibly \$986,000 thereafter." But these aren't adequate data. First, it is disheartening, although honest, to be told decisions related to your school children are not educational. All the "right-sizing" thus far has emphasized that these were educationally based decisions, but now when it comes to some of our most gifted students, decisions are no longer educational? That seems peculiar.

I would respectfully request that no action is taken until data can be collected as it has been for all of the other decisions. These data would include the actual costs of integrating gifted programs into each and every home school for the same grades that currently receive services. In doing this, the administration also needs to be honest in how they will do this and maintain the standard that the Gifted Center has set.

I can save you some time here, because you can't possibly maintain this standard. Anyone who has studied Gifted Education and seen it implemented in the Pittsburgh Public Schools knows that it is a culture that is created. It is not something that can be recreated in a room set aside at a home school. You cannot replicate the interactions between the students from different parts of the city, the freedom to explore subjects with amazing resources (both things and teachers), the independent learning that is created in this environment, and the forthcoming leadership skills that are born and nourished. This is not likely to be recreated in a room that most likely will be shared with other programs at home schools. And perhaps even more importantly, whatever is created in the home schools will be wildly different between schools and you will see some schools with terrific gifted resources and others with very little. This is not equitable or just for the gifted children of Pittsburgh who come from different neighborhoods. Most likely the best we will be able to hope for is some accelerated work in these home school "gifted programs" and no one should be fooled into thinking that this is adequate gifted education. Regardless, the responsible way of looking at this would be to calculate the true costs of implementing adequate and equal gifted programs in each and every school (materials, rooms, teachers, etc.) including all grades that currently use the gifted center and then comparing it to what is spent now on the Gifted Center and the transportation to the program.

As we interact with our friends and relatives who live in the suburbs with children the same ages as our own, there are two things they always mention and envy about the city schools – the fact that we have language magnets that start language immersion in Kindergarten and the fact that we have the Gifted Center – a place where gifted education truly takes place in an ideal atmosphere. Why would we close the Gifted Center, why wouldn't we make it a model for others to follow? Why wouldn't we use it as a source to approach foundations who might want to encourage the best and the brightest in our city schools? These two programs that are the envy of suburban friends are also part of what keeps people who choose to send their children to the city schools doing just that. Without these outstanding resources, the reasons to be in the city schools may not outnumber some of the costs and we may find ourselves yet again needing to "right size". As superintendent and the school board, you must look at all of your constituents and part of that constituency consists of individuals who make a conscious choice to have their children in the city schools and have other options available. We want a diverse group of children in the Pittsburgh Public Schools and we want people who have consciously chosen to be here.

I respectfully request that you postpone any decision related to the Gifted Center until you have collected and shared the data that would reasonably compare the current cost of the gifted center and the cost to duplicate this program in each and every home school. This would be a responsible way to make a decision related to gifted education in the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Sincerely,

Catherine V. Palmer