

Pittsburgh Public Schools Friendship Special Public Hearing Testimonies Submitted Not Read
July 22, 2025

Alexandra Schaefers

alexandrampage@gmail.com

July 15, 2025

Dear Dr. Walters, Board of Directors, and PPS Leadership,

I am the parent of two students at Pittsburgh Montessori—a rising preschooler and a third grader. Please accept this as my testimony regarding the proposed relocation of Montessori to the Linden building. While I understand the stated goals of this move—expansion, cost savings, and increased equity—and agree with them in theory, I remain unconvinced that these outcomes are achievable, especially due to the fact that you offer no concrete plan. More importantly, I worry the transition will compromise the quality and stability of a thriving school community. I am fearful you will provide, even temporarily, my own children a lower-quality education and will dismantle their social experience as they get swept up in the hiccups of this transition and expansion process, victims of PPS’s long-term financial irresponsibility.

Expansion: Unclear Strategy and Questionable Outcomes

PPS projects that this move would allow for 141 additional seats. Yet it remains unclear how this expansion would be implemented or sustained. Many families and community members question whether the Linden building can realistically accommodate Pittsburgh Montessori’s current enrollment—let alone a larger one. The district’s projection assumes a significant increase, but provides little detail about how this would be physically possible or pedagogically sound.

How can you prove Linden really has the physical space to support an additional seven (based on 22 children per homeroom) new homerooms, associated specials like art, music, and physical education and additional learning support classrooms that would be inevitably required? Plus a gifted room and dedicated science room listed on your upgrade plan? Is

Pittsburgh Public Schools Friendship Special Public Hearing Testimonies Submitted Not Read July 22, 2025

Linden's cafeteria also a multipurpose room used for gym classes? That means more students to eat lunch and simultaneously take gym classes, with the same amount of space and one gym teacher. Are our kids going to eat lunch at 10am and have PE less frequently? Lunch is already only 20 minutes long, which is a struggle for preschoolers.

Will staff from shuttered buildings be used to fill in gaps or is PPS prepared to recruit or train Montessori-certified teachers? The Montessori method is a distinct pedagogical approach that requires specialized training in both philosophy and practice. Without this training, a teacher may unintentionally undermine the method's effectiveness.

How do you plan expansion? At the Children's House level? At every age group? Montessori education is most effective when children begin in early childhood and build on a consistent learning structure. Research shows that late-entry students often struggle to adapt to Montessori classrooms (Lillard, 2017), potentially disrupting learning for all. If the intent is to phase in older students rapidly to fill numbers the educational benefits are likely to be diluted. Moreover, studies indicate that the ideal size for an elementary school is around 350 students. The structure, pedagogy, and philosophy of Montessori education rely on a level of intimacy and individualization that is harder to maintain in large schools. A sudden increase to over 500 could negatively affect school climate, reduce individualized support, and stretch existing resources and schedules thin—particularly for specials, meals, and library time which is a contradiction to the ability to offer “enhanced educational opportunities” set forth in your facilities plan.

In contrast, has the district surveyed current or prospective families to determine how many would leave the program, withdraw from the waitlist, or opt not to enter the lottery at all if Montessori were relocated? Especially preschool-aged students who don't qualify for transportation? Without this data, projections of growth are based on assumption rather than reality—and may ultimately lead to decreased enrollment rather than expansion. If part of the district's strategy relies on current families quietly leaving to make room for new ones—perhaps to shift the demographic makeup—then that intention should be stated transparently. Equity cannot be achieved through disruption or attrition. If the goal is to increase access for underserved students, the district should expand supports, improve outreach, and remove

Pittsburgh Public Schools Friendship Special Public Hearing Testimonies Submitted Not Read July 22, 2025

structural barriers—not rely on instability to create space.

Cost Savings: Unproven and Possibly Inflated

Much of the financial justification for vacating the Friendship building centers on maintenance costs, especially HVAC and ADA compliance. However, no independent assessments or cost comparisons have been provided to the public. It is, however, possible to access permits and figures from completed projects involving former Pittsburgh Public School and parochial school buildings that are now high- end condos or commercially used property. From these, and simple conversations with experts in the fields of engineering, architecture and licensing, it is easy to deduce that not only are renovations to become on par with Linden (only ADA accessible), or better, (adding AC and a gifted room) completely doable, but your renovation numbers are exaggerated to push the agenda that a move is a must.

If Linden also suffers from extreme heat—as seen during its June 2024 move to virtual learning—relocating does not solve the problem, especially when PPS's calendar keeps students in school late into June. Adjusting the calendar, like many of the region's high performing programs in historic buildings, may be a more practical and cost-effective solution. Allowing individual classroom air conditioning units is another. Further, how are we to trust that you will uproot students to Linden and follow through on providing air conditioning at all? Millions of dollars have been allocated to district-wide HVAC upgrades and Linden is not even on the initial list of upgrades.

Additionally, the move introduces new ongoing expenses: hiring Montessori-trained teachers, increasing specials staff, and expanding transportation. With more current families living farther from the proposed site, the district will need to offer busing to several neighborhoods which previously had to provide their own transportation (Garfield, Bloomfield, parts of Morningside and Highland Park, to name a few)—at a time when transportation services are already stretched. Is this now doable because all other magnets will become neighborhood schools, essentially making most students ineligible for transportation?

Is This Really Expansion—a Merger in Disguise or a Quick Gain?

The district claims that relocating Montessori to Linden will create 141 new seats. However, that number mirrors Linden’s current enrollment—raising the question: is this a true expansion, or a quiet merger? If Linden students are given first priority in the Montessori lottery, as stated, then the district may be using Montessori to absorb an existing population—not expanding access for families actively seeking a Montessori education.

In a district that is eliminating magnet options, it is fair to fear this series of decisions—relocating Montessori without transparency, prioritizing Linden students in the lottery, and the lack of community engagement that results in any change—may be a deliberate strategy to quietly dismantle a high performing magnet.

Additionally, I’m concerned that this decision is being driven primarily by the opportunity to sell a high-value public asset. You will expect the existing student body and staff to squeeze into a new location, not deliver on upgrades, wipe data that you knew was wrong all along about expansion and reap the rewards of a beautiful property.

In all instances, it feels as though the district assumes families won’t notice or question the long-term implications of these decisions. Your engagement opportunities feel seriously performative. Families deserve honest, transparent dialogue about the future of Montessori—not a slow, behind-the-scenes erosion masked by strategic appeasement.

Equity: A Flawed Premise

Improving equity requires more than relocation. While some argue that Linden’s size and availability of “seats” will give access to more children, that alone does not guarantee improved access for underserved families. In fact, the Friendship site is already more affordable for many families, with surrounding home values significantly lower than those near Linden. The physical location of the Friendship site has sustained the enrollment and waitlist. How is pushing Montessori into a wealthier neighborhood equity?

A consultant hired by the district noted that the lottery system favors wealthier families. But this reflects a problem with access to the lottery, ability to apply and persist through the process and,

Pittsburgh Public Schools Friendship Special Public Hearing Testimonies Submitted Not Read
July 22, 2025

not the lottery itself. In reality, Montessori at Friendship is already a Title I school, and the PTA operates a weekend and holiday Backpack Initiative, meaning a significant portion of its students come from low-income households. The lottery is not inherently biased—it is who hears about it, who can navigate it, and who has the resources to follow through that shapes outcomes. If the district is serious about equity, the solution is not to dismantle a successful program or relocate it in the hopes of shifting demographics. Equity cannot be achieved through disruption or displacement.

Barriers to access aren't just about the size of a building:

Many families in Pittsburgh don't even know that PPS offers public preschool, how to navigate the school lottery, or what Montessori actually means. Misconceptions—like the idea that Montessori is undisciplined or only for affluent families—are widespread. Yet instead of addressing this through clear outreach, a high-quality website with expansive explanations of each school, or community-based engagement, the district has relied almost entirely on word of mouth, school staff, and the Montessori parent community to promote the program.

At the same time, the families who do participate and who have managed to navigate the lottery process on their own—many of whom come from racially and economically diverse backgrounds—have been unfairly characterized in media coverage and even by the district's own consultants as part of an elitist bubble. This contradiction undermines public trust and does little to advance genuine equity.

Is there published evidence of unmet demand for Montessori among marginalized families? Has PPS conducted district-wide polling to determine whether families want Montessori, understand it, and view it as a good fit for their child?

Montessori is not for every learner. Many families prefer their neighborhood school or a more traditional instructional model. Others know that a model requiring high levels of self-direction may not suit their child's learning needs. Expansion only makes sense if there is demonstrated desire and alignment—not just the illusion of equity created by moving a building.

Additionally, the logistical supports that make Montessori accessible in Friendship may not exist

Pittsburgh Public Schools Friendship Special Public Hearing Testimonies Submitted Not Read July 22, 2025

at Linden. The Friendship and Garfield neighborhoods are home to three or more established aftercare providers—some of which serve preschoolers with daycare licensure. These services make attending the program (and managing PPS’s frequent half days), doable for working families. Has the district verified whether comparable half-day and aftercare options exist near Linden?

Even the move itself presents barriers. A location farther east will deter many families whose children already endure long bus rides, like from the North Side or West End. Walkability and transit access at Friendship are objectively better than in Point Breeze, as confirmed by neighborhood walk scores and bus route data. Families—not just students—deserve access to the building where their children attend. You can’t simply relocate a program and assume underserved families will follow.

Community Disruption: An Undervalued Loss

Pittsburgh Montessori at Friendship is a model of what public magnet schools can achieve. It has a diverse, committed community, strong family involvement, and a walkable neighborhood that fosters daily interaction and shared investment. Moving the school risks dismantling this success for an uncertain gain.

Mr. Gene Walker has said, “It’s not the building that makes the school—it’s the people.” But when a plan disrupts the very people and relationships that make a school thrive—its teachers, students, and families—the building does matter. A change of location without the trust and support of the community risks undermining everything that makes the school work. Montessori works because of the people—and the place. The proposed move jeopardizes both.

Conclusion

Instead of building on a strong foundation, this plan takes an unnecessary and risky gamble. The relocation promises benefits it may not deliver, while disregarding the stability, equity, and excellence that Pittsburgh Montessori already embodies. I respectfully urge you to reconsider this decision, engage the community more meaningfully, and invest our tax dollars in a beautiful



Pittsburgh Public Schools Friendship Special Public Hearing Testimonies Submitted Not Read
July 22, 2025

building where public education is working—rather than disrupt it.

Sincerely,

Alexandra Schaefers

Pittsburgh Public Schools Friendship Special Public Hearing Testimonies Submitted Not Read
July 22, 2025

Sarah Yazvac

To whom it may concern,

My name is Sarah Yazvac and I am the proud art teacher at Pittsburgh Montessori.

I will make this very short: I am concerned about the potential move to Linden. As an educator, I want the best for my students, and being ADA compliant is necessary to best serve our students and community. But, while I personally believe in the value of preserving our historic school buildings, I can put that aside if I believe the move will have a positive impact on the educational experience of our students.

My deepest concern is that somehow numbers are being miscalculated, and Linden will not be able to hold our current students, plus any Linden students who elect to enroll into the program. Based on published documents, discussions with colleagues who worked in both buildings, and my own knowledge of the Friendship building, I do not see how we will fit into Linden, expand the student body, and still maintain spaces for art, music, library, speech, etc. It would be a huge disservice to the students of Pittsburgh Montessori if these offerings were displaced and offered "on a cart." Our special subjects deserve dedicated spaces for students to fully engage in our content areas.

I am asking you to please, please, please, double check the numbers. Make sure the PreK 3 and PreK 4 students are included in the counts. Consider the classrooms required outside of homerooms that make the school tick. We all want what is best for the children of Pittsburgh. Please, do not move our program without being certain it will better the quality of education for our students. Thank you for your consideration.



Pittsburgh Public Schools Friendship Special Public Hearing Testimonies Submitted Not Read
July 22, 2025



Pittsburgh Public Schools Friendship Special Public Hearing Testimonies Submitted Not Read
July 22, 2025