



Pittsburgh Public Schools Friendship Special Public Hearing Testimonies
July 22, 2025

#1

Karen Cornell

Parent



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#2

Megan Palomo

Parent, Community Member

(Please see separate attachment)

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#3

Martha Riecks

Parent

Martha Riecks: Testimony presented at the 7/22/25 public hearing

I looked at a calendar today and realized I have been a PPS parent since August of 2013, when my oldest started preK4 at Montessori and I will be a PPS parent through May of 2037.

I'll have 24 years of tenure as a PPS parent (if I did the math right) which to be honest, seems insane, and I must point out is a longer commitment than many staff positions or board members.

So I think I am very justified in speaking up once again about my concerns about the current approach to closures and consolidations, despite having shared these at multiple other public hearings this year.

My youngest currently attends Montessori, and in case you were wondering, I do I plan to keep him enrolled in this magnet program as long as we have a public Montessori option in PPS. Because I value Montessori education and I think we should be adding Montessori schools to the district, not closing elementary magnets. But I digress.

But I can be OK with that magnet program move to a different building and still not be OK agree with your plans to close all other elementary magnet programs or close and divest the Friendship School Building, which is why I'm speaking tonight.

Friendship School was built in 1899, making it a community asset that is rich in history and has served students for generations.

I, along with the many speakers you'll hear from tonight, think it has the potential to continue serving students for generations to come.

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Friendship School is uniquely situated with direct access to much of the east end

- It's located at the merge point of 5 densely populated neighborhoods: Friendship, Bloomfield, Garfield, East Liberty and Shadyside and is located within 1.5 miles of Lawrenceville, Highland Park, Larimer, Stanton Heights, Morningside and North Oakland.

- The building is situated near – but not directly on – some of the most heavily traveled streets and state highways in the east end of Pittsburgh: Penn Ave, Negley Ave and the Centre/Baum Corridor. Being located on Friendship Ave. means you have a school located on a safer, secondary travel route that is conveniently located just blocks in every direction from 3 main travel corridors and countless bus lines.

- Friendship School has a walkability score of 92, a transit score of 65 and a bikers score of 94. I encourage you to look up all PPS buildings at www.walkscore.com to gain a better understanding of the impact of how the geography of Pittsburgh influences how all of us move throughout the city.

Friendship School is located on a large, flat lot, encompassing a HUGE city block.

- Yes, I know at the current time the school is not ADA accessible and lacks school-wide air conditioning. And one of the few points I agree with the PPS Future ready plan on is that EVERY single building PPS owns and operates needs to be accessible and have a/c.

- So let's modernize Friendship School so it is ADA Accessible and has air conditioning. Let's install that elevator that was supposed to be installed back in 2014 or 2015 I believe, when the district assured us we'd come back after summer break to a more ADA accessible building. An elevator that if it had been installed may have earned this building a different score on the facility report card. But I digress.

- Not only could the existing building be modernized, the large flat lot would allow PPS to easily build and expand – something that is not easy to do on many of the school sites that you plan to retain, such as Liberty, positioned on a much smaller lot in a denser neighborhood, or Linden, which sites on a steeply sloped lot. If we want future-ready facilities, shouldn't we be keeping the sites with the most potential to create future ready-facilities?

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I do not agree with the rush to close buildings or the process that has been followed to identify which buildings to be closed. It has been flawed and lacking from the get-go.

We are now sitting here with a “Future Ready plan” based on highly questionable numbers and if implemented as currently proposed, every stakeholder in this district that has been following along has serious concerns about class sizes, school deserts and facility space.

I’m not saying we should be operating schools that serve only 7 children per grade, which is type of example that you keep sharing with us as to why this entire plan is justified.

But I truly do not understand how you think the entire school district will fit into just the buildings being kept as part of this future ready plan.

And once you move forward with the closure and sale of historic buildings, built in the heart of popular and desirable neighborhoods, like Friendship, Fulton or Woolslayer, they are gone. Public assets that cannot be reclaimed or used for the benefit of our city’s students.

#4

Sara Leitera

Parent

Testimony to School Board regarding Friendship Building 7/22/25

Good evening members of the board,

My name is Sara Leitera and I'm a parent of two PPS students, past PTA President at Montessori- a Realtor —and someone who believes deeply in the power of public schools to build strong communities. Schools anchor neighborhoods—economically, socially, and emotionally.

I've spent almost 20 years helping families put down roots in this city. One thing that is consistently top of mind for home buyers are the schools... Can we walk there? Do families feel welcome? Is it diverse? Generally speaking, School closures change the energy of communities. Families look for alternatives. And a sense of loss settles in.

Specifically speaking about Friendship vs. Linden....

Why move a successful, high demand program out of a building that works—into one that simply doesn't work as well? When a program like this is thriving—you don't move it. You build on it.

PPS's capacity models paint a false picture of underuse at Friendship. In truth, we're at capacity every year, working with both the Magnet and Early Childhood offices to accommodate waitlisted families. Linden's calculated capacity is only four students higher, yet it also lacks many functional advantages.

Friendship's location and design are ideal. It's on a flat block—more inclusive and accessible for those of all abilities. It's fenced, safe, and has multiple outdoor spaces used daily for learning and play. It also hosts a large, flat garden in partnership with Grow Pittsburgh. Linden, which sits on a steep hill, has very limited flat, sunny outdoor space ideal for a garden.

The Friendship Community Group has offered to partner on renovations of Friendship, including ADA improvements and air conditioning, and even explored expanding the building—something physically impossible at Linden due to its lot constraints. Friendship is the only location where we could potentially double the program size to meet demand.

Let's consider community access. Friendship is located at the heart of five neighborhoods and serves students from at least seven more—many students are within walking distance. Families rely on public transit, walking, and biking, and this location supports all three. Linden is harder to reach and serves a less diverse and less central community. Moving the program would mean longer commutes for current families, less walkability, less diversity, and fewer connections to the community partners we have in place—like Assemble after school programs and local stores—that enrich our curriculum through walking field trips and hands-on learning.

Lastly, consider the cost. Both buildings need updates, but only one offers expansion opportunities. Independent experts have said the cost estimates to renovate Friendship have been overstated. Renovating Linden won't be cheap either, especially after adding in the cost of moving the entire program there.

Friendship is central, walkable, accessible, expandable, and beloved. It has strong community investment, unique program features, and serves as a vital public asset.

When schools close or are moved out of central locations, we see ripple effects. The sense of community—of belonging—starts to fade. We've seen this happen across the country and in PPS when schools were closed the last time. Moving the program doesn't just disrupt children and families—it sends a message: This neighborhood doesn't matter as much. This community isn't worth investing in.

This move doesn't make financial sense. It doesn't make logistical sense. And it certainly doesn't serve the best interest of our students, families, or staff. Let's not disrupt a thriving program and



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neglect or sell off a building with so much potential. Instead, let's honor the community's investment and your own commitment to being "future-ready"—by investing in Friendship, not abandoning it.

Friendship isn't just a building—it's a living part of this city's fabric. And when we protect our strongest schools, we're not just investing in education. We're investing in Pittsburgh's future.

Thank you

Sara Leitera



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#5

Steven Winslow

Parent

#6

Natalie Antonucci

Parent

Hi, my name is Natalie Antonucci, and my children, Vincent and Meredith will be incoming Kindergarten and Pre-K3 students at Pittsburgh Montessori. We live in the Upper Hill, and this will be our 4th year at Montessori.

I am here today, along with numerous parents and community members, to ask you to reconsider the closing of the Friendship Building.

Moving Montessori to Linden is a lateral move with no identifiable gains outside of the elevator. Both buildings were built around the same time: Friendship in 1899 and Linden in 1903. Neither building is fully air conditioned. The capacity of each school is practically the same: according to the ERS numbers, Linden can hold 31 more students... HOWEVER, if you count the Friendship demountables, which were not counted in the ERS numbers, then it only holds 4 more students!

Both schools have green space and a playground - while Friendship's are larger, flatter, and better maintained. Finally, and most importantly, the area in which the Friendship Building far surpasses Linden is LOCATION!

If PPS will be keeping magnet schools that are open to students across the district, then in order to keep these schools accessible for ALL students, it is of utmost importance to keep these magnet schools centrally located. The Friendship school is already further East than is ideal for a magnet school. Relocating to the Linden Building would move the school even further east to one of the easternmost neighborhoods in the city. My son has a classmate who lives in the Northside - to get to and from the Friendship Building by bus it is 1 hour each way. The Linden location would add at least 20 minutes in each direction. She is 6 years old. That is too long on a bus. In order to keep the Montessori Program equitable for all families, it needs to be centrally located! Our current Friendship location is far better suited for a magnet program than Linden.

From what I gather, the primary factor preventing the district from keeping the Friendship Building for Montessori is cost. While the district is claiming that it will cost \$16.57 million dollars to update the Friendship school, the Friendship Community Group has also had a professional



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estimate done and it comes in drastically lower at \$5.4 million! So I ask you, please, PLEASE, before voting to close a school building that is thriving and cherished by so many, make sure that your numbers are straight - get at least 3 more cost estimates with detailed breakdowns from other contractors. Please be 100% certain that this very high estimate of \$16.57 million dollars is accurate. Plus, use the Friendship Community Group as a resource! PPS doesn't have to do this alone - the Friendship Community Group is offering to help secure outside funding through grants and other partnerships. Use that! Keep this historic building and thriving school community alive!

Thank you



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#7

Kara Britanik

Parent



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#8

Lucy Thompson

Student



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#9

Kari Thompson

Parent



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#10

Kate Diersen

Parent



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#11

Becky Mingo



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#12

Anne Farris

#13

Raeed Chowdhury

Keeping our community strong: a plea to save the Friendship Montessori school

Introduction

My wife and I moved to Pittsburgh from Chicago six years ago, into the Friendship neighborhood

Our neighborhood in Chicago and Friendship here were both historic and full of character, but Friendship is something special--it has a real, inclusive community.

Don't get me wrong--I love Chicago, but I lived there for 7 years, and I never had a single conversation with any of my neighbors.

In Friendship, within a single year, it felt like we had a little family in this neighborhood.

Main point

A crucial part of the Friendship community is the Montessori school and the building it occupies.

Moving the school would be ripping a piece of the soul out of the neighborhood.

Here's my main concern: what fills the hole when a thriving school leaves a community?

I've been to neighborhoods with closed schools (I'm sure with the best intentions), and they are not neighborhoods to aspire to.

I'll be honest: I have a three year old son who was lucky enough to be picked to attend the school, and I don't want his learning to be disrupted.

It is possible that after some disruption, he will be okay at the new location, despite it being far less convenient for us to get to the school.

But the Friendship neighborhood will suffer, and I'm afraid it won't recover.

Call to action

I am urging you to slow down this process and explore alternative solutions that could



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support the existing community, rather than break it apart.

Thank you



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#14

Jennifer Haven

Community Member



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#15

Gillian McTiernan

Parent, Community Member



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#16

Kerry O'Connor

Teacher/Staff

#17

Valerie Webb-Allman

Parent, Community Member

Friendship closure public hearing

7.22.25

Hello again.

My comments and concerns over the closure of Friendship's building are vastly different from my concerns over the other school closures you will be deliberating on. Like the school model itself, this closure is unique in the FU plan too. Like most, I am concerned about what happens with the building, the park, the cost to fix the Friendship building vs moving everyone to Linden, and so-forth. But, honestly, I have the most concern for the Linden staff and community.

Montessori families will keep their magnet status, likely their teachers, and they will still have the program they want. It appears that their school community will likely move as a unit from one place to the other, which is all that some of these other schools on the closure list can dream of.

Of all the schools named in the closure plan, this one loses the least. But, what happens with Linden? I know that, at least initially, many of the Linden kids will be absorbed into Montessori. However, what happens to the staff? Will they stay, be trained in Montessori methods and how will that training be implemented so that the program maintains fidelity? Or, will Linden students lose their program and the trusted adults that they have now?

What is the feeder for Linden students now? Currently, Linden students feed into the International Baccalaureate program. Will that be the same or does that change? The current plan has them feeding into Sterrett and then Alderdice, but many families chose Linden so that their children could later get into the International Baccalaureate program. Will they have a choice? Also, why aren't we expanding Montessori access city wide or to upper grade levels? We are about to have a Montessori charter competitor in the Northside that is already looking at K-8 and is planning to expand to a Montessori high school. Why wasn't that part of the considerations?

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How about magnet status? Is Montessori going to transition to a neighborhood magnet with Linden feeder students getting priority? What about little siblings that aren't in Linden yet but have older siblings at the school from outside the feeder? Do they get weighted applications?

How will this closure eliminate the equity issue around Montessori? Will you stop allowing affluent families to buy their way into a weighted application by paying to go to the pre-K? How does this change any of the inequities around magnets when you make this the only one left?

How do you stop people from just purchasing property in this feeder and gentrifying the neighborhood even further?

You claim that you want to eliminate pockets of excellence, but all you're doing is shaking up everyone else and keeping the whitest, most affluent schools and students protected. That isn't achieving equity, it isn't addressing complications around magnets and it certainly doesn't eliminate the pockets of excellence that you claim is one of the driving forces of these changes. The only thing this plan does for Friendship is add a few new black and brown kids to the mix. It doesn't actually address equity issues, magnet issues or the pocket of excellence that you chose to keep. The sad part to all of this is that Friendship families are getting a whole public hearing when Linden families are likely going to sacrifice the most.



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#18

Lily Allman

Student



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#19

Sara DeLucia

Parent, Community Member



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#20

Joseph DeLucia

Parent, Community Member



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#21

Julionna Elean

Teacher/Staff, Parent

#22

Jessica Ghilani

Parent, Community Member

Montessori Belongs in the Friendship Building: Please renovate rather than close.

I am a PPS parent of two students, both of who have matriculated or will matriculate from PreK to 5th grade at PPS Montessori. I am asking that the board please vote no on the decision to close the Friendship building and relocate the Montessori magnet program to PPS Linden. The facilities utilization plan at present entails a closure of three beloved elementary education programs within a short radius of one another: Woolslair, Arsenal (which is being converted to 6-8 only), and Friendship. Doing so will turn the Lawrenceville, Bloomfield, Friendship, Garfield area into a public elementary school desert.

Instead, Montessori at the Friendship building should be updated to be ADA compatible and expanded to offer additional space for students to learn and thrive. The Friendship building is a beautiful and unique property that should remain a public asset and continue as a public school. Montessori at Friendship is on a parcel of land that is flat, occupying an entire city block, surrounded with a fence and beautiful green space. Educators take advantage of this topography and children of all ages benefit from learning there, tremendously. Our youngest learners are kept safe by a perimeter that is set back from the street and protected with a fence. The set up of the building itself, with wide open hallways is conducive to Montessori methods.

It is my understanding that the Linden parcel is very different from the above mentioned attributes. The Linden building houses its Prek learners in a separate area from the rest of the school. This set up would not be compatible with Montessori because of the integration of multi-age classrooms that is central to the curricular method.

The Friendship Community Group and multiple elected leaders have submitted a dossier outlining their support to retain PPS Montessori at Friendship. Additionally, the community group includes experts in historic preservation and renovation that have submitted estimated costs for updating the building to be ADA compatible that are far lower than the district's estimate.

It is my understanding that the Linden building will not offer substantive additional seats for the Montessori program. Because it is built into a hillside, the opportunity to expand the space is constrained in ways that the current Friendship facility is not. Additionally, it is possible that the data the district has been using has not included our preK student numbers, artificially depressing the facility utilization data, perhaps to justify its relocation and the building's closure.



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I am asking you to please reconsider this decision, slow down this building closure process to make sure it is done in a way that includes community buy in, and vote against closing the Friendship facility. It is too important an asset for the district to lose. Please instead renovate and expand on its existing strengths, allowing the program to be retained at Friendship.

Jessica Ghilani, PhD

PPS Parent and Community Member



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#23

James Fogarty

Parent, Organization, Community Member

(See attachment)



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