

Pittsburgh Public Schools Budget Public Hearing Testimonies
December 8, 2025

#1

Emily Sawyer

Parent, Substitute Teacher

Emily Sawyer, parent of 4 PPS students and 1 PPS graduate

● We are once again asking the community to bear the cost of us not insisting that those who have more put more skin in the game. We hand out tax abatements like candy, let corporations and the rich dictate and exploit tax law, and then insist we can't meet our needs without asking regular folks to bear the brunt. Allegheny county raised property taxes 36% just last year, and now the city is proposing a 30% property tax increase as well! Something has got to give! Everything is getting more expensive, wages are not rising, and regular people will not always be able to rescue our own leaders from their lack of courage and paucity of vision.

● We hand out those tax abatements because “businesses and developers couldn't possibly be expected to choose Pittsburgh without those deals,” but we have no such deals for regular folks who live here or are moving in. For example, the developer that flipped the house we currently borrow for the bank was given some sort of sweetheart deal so that we had to pay the full year's property taxes at the new value even though we didn't close on the loan until the end of August, and the house was not worth the new value all year because the developer paid a pittance for it at the beginning of that same year. This is just one example when we say that developers and corporations get the benefits in this city at the cost of residents.

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● Manchester/Chateau specifically is getting an enormous development but at what cost?

○ To my knowledge there has still been no community benefits agreement or impact study. Generic promises about “affordable housing” and “jobs” that are rarely delivered with no accountability are all I’ve seen.

○ And we have a homestead exemption that will never be sufficient for longtime homeowners. Especially if Allegheny County continues to delay and doesn't decide to do reassessments until after the development is done.

○ And we are funneling our EDUCATION tax dollars to “transit revitalization,” which is not the school district’s job or mandate and is NOT an appropriate use of said dollars in the name of future tax dollars on a development that should be paying increasing school taxes into our schools immediately as the value of their development increases, but won’t and are trying to buy us off with a charitable donation to MCG. I love MCG, but give me a break. We won’t be bribed. We don’t need charity. We need developers and large corporations to pay their fair share of taxes! These tax breaks are like charity for the rich. Regular people of course don’t get these breaks even though WE ARE this city. We are the ones who create profits for these enormous developers and corporations by living here, working here, and buying here. It’s so backwards.

○ I think the concept of organized abandonment is really instructive here: the intentional disinvestment in communities which, in turn, creates opportunities for extraction, revenue generation, and carceral enforcement to fill the cracks of a compromised social infrastructure.¹

● Next, you’ll close our neighborhood school in Manchester, the longtime residents will be priced out with new development, and then you’ll build a brand new school for the rich, white kids who end up moving in. This is not a conspiracy theory. This is what happens over and over again. And it’s enough now.

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● I am not even saying that the school district shouldn't raise taxes, as I recognize the reality that this is the main lever available to you. But I am saying that we need to make it a COLLECTIVE work to insist that the largest corporations and the richest neighbors pay their fair share. These are the people and businesses who just got the largest tax break in history from the federal government, so let's create policy and regulation that reallocate some of that tax avoidance into our city, county, and schools.

○ It should be an unending onslaught from every corner of this city and county to MAKE UPMC pay their property taxes. They should not be able to rest until it happens. Regular people are trying, but we need people with power to throw their whole weight into it.

○ We should pride ourselves on being a city that is so future-thinking and welcoming that we don't give tax breaks to companies to move in, but we insist that they pay their taxes because they are joining a community that takes care of its people. This is what should make a place attractive to companies.

○ We should never let Harrisburg rest until they kick data centers out of our state because they are ruining regular people's lives, making the environment less livable, and making life increasingly expensive.

○ We should be knocking down the state house doors insisting on changing the school transportation laws here.

○ Etc, etc, etc – there are so many things that need doing besides just always raising taxes that the Board and the District can throw its influence and power into. Instead of just saying, "that's not our job."

● We are fighting with the city over scraps in the contested EIT revenue when our children's education is being sacrificed to profit and growth. We are fighting each other instead of targeting the systems that keep us in scarcity. I know this is all "bigger" than the tax decision before you at the moment, but it's really not.

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● THE WORLD IS FOR PEOPLE. We have to stop making decisions that aren't people centered. Corporations don't care about people. Nothing is trickling down but exploitation. Every job is not a good job. All money is not good money.

● I know this isn't "the school board's work." But it has to become work that we are all doing. If we want to save public education, we have to fight TOGETHER at every level. We have to reject the market logic of privatization, the lie that freedom is synonymous with choice, and the belief that anyone can survive a system that insists we must create winners and losers when it comes to educating children. This isn't baseball. If someone "wins" (gets an excellent education that serves them well), someone else doesn't have to "lose". We can decide to do things differently.

2

● People will reach a limit. You will reach a point where you can't squeeze anymore out of regular tax payers. We'll be homeless, corporations and the already rich will be richer, and public education will die because we let the "logic" of people who don't believe in public education or even the public dictate our decisions right now.

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

– Andre Henry

1 Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation. New York: Verso, 2022.

2 Jenkins, Lee. "Permission to Forget And Nine Other Root Causes of America's Frustration with Education." Quality Press, 2005



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#2

Emily Kane

Teacher/Staff, Parent, Community Member



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#3

Laura Gallagher

Organization PA Interfaith Impact Network



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#4

Lauren Stuparitz

Parent, Organization, Community Member

#5

Mark Rauterkus

Parent, Organization, Community Member

**Mark Rauterkus, of Historic South Side to the PPS Board & Administrators on
December 8, 2025, budget hearing.**

I'm a swim coach working with the International Swim Coaches Association, a parent of PPS graduates, long-time program leader with Summer Dreamers for 10+ years and other afterschool efforts.

My podcast, Heavy Or Not, The OG Swim Guide, episode #04, spoke to some issues of aquatics in episode.

<https://sites.libsyn.com/492626/site/brain-dump-for-new-pps-admin-for-pe-at-pgh-public-schools-04-heavy-or-not-jump-cut>

Raising taxes at this time gets a be "NO" from me at this time as we are about to get punished by the City of Pittsburgh with a big tax bill.

Of course, I support the prior speaker who was critical of the corporate welfare and Tax Breaks for the developers. No TIFs.

I read the written plan that was advanced and voted down by the board. That plan was a terrible mish-mash of jumbled mess. FUD (fear, uncertainty and doubt) flowed from every page and paragraph.

It would be great if someone there might try ChatGPT to edit the document and streamline the thinking and its presentation.

My advice is to break up the actions into tiny, bite-sized steps.

Remove grades 6, 7, 8 from Westinghouse. That's one vote.

Remove grades 6, 7, 8 from Obama. That's one vote.

Remove grades 6, 7, 8 from Sci Tech. That's one vote.

Think again about middle-school CAPA in the Downtown location. I think we can support two creative and performing arts middle schools on different parts of the city and allow for expansion of High School CAPA so more in grades 9 to 12 can have that experience. Replicate and expand what is working.

Put Arsenal as a 6, 7, 8 building, removing the K-5 -- another vote.

Many of us were strongly against the formation of the schools that included grades 6 to 12 when that all happened. Take them apart again. That's a great part of the plan. But, do it school by school.

I would be 100-percent behind no 6-12 schools.

Keep the Gifted Center as it is. The Gifted program insures hundreds of families stay in the city. Putting the Gifted into Home Schools is going to fail. This will boil down to some additional worksheets and little else. Everyone in the home school wins when the gifted kids depart one day a week because more attention can be focused on those present.

I also wonder about Oliver High School on the Northside and how it is absent in the failed plan. What's up with that? Why build a new school in Northview Heights and ignore the asset that is present. Inexcusable.

Another plea is to re-launch the Athletic Reform Task Force. I'll be happy to lead those efforts for \$0.

The core of this testimony is to use experienced Pittsburgh people to fix Pittsburgh issues.

Beware of Brandon McGinley, a Post-Gazette editorial writer who is floating the ideas that the PPS Board should be taken over.

QUOTE: "Low-turnout primaries have consistently delivered frivolous people to positions of enormous responsibility for which they are radically unfit."

That nonsense is sure to hit the fan in future days and weeks. We need to push back for the sake of democracy. But we also need to have the board do its job. Passing things back to the administration is sure to result in more fumbling.

I feel that the fumbling is not on the field but in the coverage. The media has to own a great deal of the blame.

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If not a drop of ink nor a blip on the TV was devoted to the Pens, Pirates or Steelers, would anyone care? The Steelers fan base would look like the crowds that go to CMU games.

So, welcome the spotlight, the transparency, the citizens input and the board motions.

When did the P-G ever hold a debate among candidates seeking election to the school board? How many features, get-to-know you articles ran in the newspaper before the elections, as candidate announced?

NEVER!

The 4th Estate is in a deep slumber. That's part of the democratic process.

The P-G helped get us into this pickle of public policy because the watch dogs are absent.

On Grant Street, the City of Pittsburgh is in the same boat. The citizens are screwed. What always puzzles me is why does city council and even the school board send things back to be fixed? Just fix it and vote on it.

Make up a series of small steps to shepherd a plan and pass it, one-by-one.

Don't expect the Administration to do the heavy lifting as it has already run to consultants to do the thinking and homework for the administration. They outsourced things that got us into this mess.

The mayor is a lame duck. He is good for sabotage and nothing else except keeping the Oliver Bath House CLOSED. Council has to step up. The school board members need to step up. Past councils had to operate with overlords. They are waiting like vultures to descend to the schools next.

Once upon a time there was a school board that did a kitchen table budget and the media was full of ridicule. Ms Jean Fink was a hero for doing the work. But that was frowned upon by the power brokers and media.

Get it done because those that should have fumbled greatly.

Who knows about Doctor Walters. The average tenure of an urban superintendent is three years.

Prior statements from June 23, 2025

Good evening. Board members, administrators, and citizens, my name is Mark Rauterkus. We reside in the Historic South Side and currently working with the International Swim Coaches Association. And I do have a podcast called Heavy or Not.

But my roots run deep here in Pittsburgh Public Schools. My kids came through PPS. I coached swimming for years, including under Dr. Walters' leadership. He was my son's principals for a decade.

Most of the time I was his varsity swim coach. Hey, I'm coming. I saw the flag footballs on the agenda, and that's a win, you know, especially for the girls. You know, flag football is

an emerging Olympic sport, and again, it brings up some old questions we still need answered.

You know, years ago I launched co-ed water polo at Schenley, We played games and tournaments and even went out of state. We use PPS pools, and there are many of them and we swam our summer program with 200 participants when swimming and water polo ran the Liberty Mile built tech schools, but which certainly we had a little bit of support at Obama, not so much, but there's a bigger systematic issue called athletic reform. We saw that movement during Mark Roosevelt's time and earlier with Dr. John Thompson, you know, he committed to pulling sports coaches out from under the teacher's contract.

So, hey, will flag football coaches be under the union contract or are we setting that up to fail? You know, I'm, Happy that a lot of mistakes made with the right sizing are getting fixed by ending the six through 12 schools. But in those times, we also suggested a phase out of the schools rather than a hard close and letting the kids finish PPS rather than just rumor the school to its closure and death like we did at South Vo Tech. I thought magnets worked and if we could even spread the things that work, that would be great.

Our youngest, played water polo, went to, just recently graduated from Tulane Medical School. And I think if you take away the magnets, and I agree it has to be equitable, but you'll see more families leave the city. And the same for the gifted program. You know, repositioning the gifted program is going to flop.

You know, the gifted program is an asset for the city. And I still don't see anything in clarity with Oliver High School on the facility list. What's going to happen to that? Finally, you know, if the board's willing, I'd be honored to serve or chair again on the Citywide Athletic Reform Task Force.

That's one that Dr. Lane shut down, and that was a mistake. I think sports teach us how to be nimble. We need more of that. And sports teach us how to play well with others.

And we certainly need more of that, too. Good luck with your decisions.

Statement from Wednesday, December 14, 2005

Gifted Center shut down threat: Letter to PPS Board and Superintendent from Catherine Palmer, Ph.D. & mom. Catherine and Mark Rauterkus have been married since 1990.

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

Handwritten notes by Mark:

- Local principals won't stand up for the Gifted Center.
- Could suggest to end transportation to the Gifted Center and let families handle that cost. Without the buses, it could be a longer school day at The Gifted Center. At the least, PPS should phase out, not just terminate, the Gifted Center.

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#6

Michael Rennie

Parent

PPS Board,

I am a parent of two students in elementary school in Pittsburgh Public.

Overall, I am in support of the 2026 Budget but I think there are a number of areas for improvement for the 2026 Budget, and for the process and delivery for future years. There should be an additional focus on the following three areas:

Simplification: Providing the financial information in a more simple and accessible way, specifically for those that don't usually read financial documents.

Benchmarking: The Budget should routinely benchmark how PPS is doing financially compared to other school districts of a similar size, make-up, or in close geographic proximity.

Ways to balance the Budget: The Board needs to more rigorously review options to balance the budget. The Board and PPS leadership should spend more time and energy evaluating options on how to reduce costs. Increasing taxes should only be evaluated after publicly debating cost savings measures.

Simplification.

The Budget document as currently presented, and presented in previous years, is long, dense, and not user friendly. The Finance team should be creating this document with the goal of making it user friendly for any parent.

As a starting point, there are usually 10-15 pages of unnecessary information at the start of the document. Why is there a Back to School Event page at the start of the Budget? Or pages about Parent Access? This is bloat. The Finance team should work hard to remove everything that doesn't clearly add value. Alternatively, move everything that is required by law to the end of the document.

The Budget should also focus on providing simple, clear infographics. For inspiration, they should look to the recent A+ Schools report for this. This should also tie in with the "benchmarking" section below, to provide simple, clear information to average readers.

The Budget should also have a very clear and accessible 1-2 page “Executive Overview”. This should be presented on behalf of the Superintendent. If he had to boil the whole budget down to 2 pages, what would he call out? What are the challenges for 2026 (e.g. rising staff costs, underutilization)? What are the opportunities? Where is he proud of where we are spending money (e.g. teacher salaries)?

Benchmarking

How do we know how PPS is doing from a financial management perspective? Poorly? Wonderfully? One way to provide visibility and feedback is to benchmark against other School Districts. I recommend as a starting point that the Budget provides benchmarks of spending per pupil, teacher salary benchmarks, admin vs teacher spending, and capex spending.

Benchmarking should also happen internally as a way to provide additional visibility. As a starting point, the Budget should benchmark school spending against other schools. How much is spent at Faison compared to Weil compared to Montessori?

Ways to balance the Budget

The Board has continued to focus on sustainably managing the budget. This work must continue. As part of this, additional effort needs to go into evaluating options to cut costs. It is perfectly reasonable to ask the Superintendent and the CFO to offer suggestions here. I know there is some focus on unfilled positions, but the conversation should go beyond that. If the Board didn’t want to raise taxes and place an additional burden on the parents and taxpayers of Pittsburgh City, how could they reduce costs? If the Superintendent had to save \$10million/year, how would he do that? Where would those savings come from? That is a conversation that I haven’t seen take place and needs to happen publicly.

This also ties in with the Facilities Utilization/Future Ready plan. Overall, the impact of the plan on the finances and budget of PPS was understated. This seemed to be an intentional move by the Superintendent and his leadership team as they moved from talking about utilization/costs to talking about equity. The cost avoidance of the Plan should be elevated as part of this ongoing conversation.

Sincerely,



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Michael Rennie

#7

Ms. Paulette Foster

Parent, Organization, Community Member



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#8

Michael Cummins

Parent



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#9

Shannon Stringer

Parent



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#10

Teaira Collins

Teacher/Staff, Parent, Organization



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#11

Valerie Webb-Allman

Parent

Pittsburgh Public Schools Budget Public Hearing Testimonies
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#12

Lily Allman

Student



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