



Pittsburgh Public Schools Public Hearing Testimonies
December 15, 2025

#1

Sarah Fishbein

Parent

#2

Judith Adelson

Parent, Organization

To the PPS Policy Committee:

We are Pittsburgh Public Unplugged (PPUP), a local chapter of PA Unplugged, part of a statewide coalition committed to **a cultural shift in our approach to screens & social media during childhood and adolescence.**

We applaud and support PPS's effort to update its Electronic Devices Policy #216. More than twenty public school districts in Pennsylvania have already gone phone free by implementing bell-to-bell bans (i.e.: spanning from the first period of the school day to the last period of the school day.) Their leaders describe this policy as “transformational” for teaching and learning in their schools. 34 States have passed phone-free legislation.

The document with our recommended edits and comments can be accessed either by clicking [THIS LINK](#) or opening the attachment. Our document refers to and correlates with the Policy Committee’s document “216 Electronic Devices Policy - Cmte Input CLEAN”

Also attached is our PDF: “PA Phone-Free School Board Packet.” The FAQ in this packet addresses concerns such as why the “honor system” doesn’t work, and free/low-cost phone storage solutions. Please consult the packet for valuable data, endorsements and coalition-partners’ websites replete with resources.

Ultimately, to truly make "an educational environment that is safe and secure for district students" schoolissued devices must be “locked down.” The number of school districts doing so is growing and PPS should do the same. In the short term, PPS should take these steps:

- Block students' ability to download software (Minecraft, etc.)
- Block YouTube for grades K-8
- Block sites where students can communicate with strangers such as Omegle, etc.
- Not allow teachers to permit browsing the internet (i.e.: “surfing”) when students complete assignments or during any other “free-time” during school.

Teachers should teach and not police tech usage. Placing them in this position is a demoralizing game of “whack-a-mole.” The burden should be borne by the IT department. To support the above, we propose adding language to the policy that explicitly prohibits “surfing” and the playing of online games.

We are not anti-technology. When used with intention and purpose, we believe tech can be a powerful tool. However, too many opportunities are opening up too quickly and schools’ ability to modify teaching to accommodate “ed tech” is outpacing their capacity for making wise and farsighted use of these tools. We urge PPS to do more to vet digital tools before incorporating their use in a classroom for safety, data privacy, effectiveness and compliance with existing laws - whether these tools be



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hardware, software including apps and websites, and especially platforms that have high models of gamification.

In closing, we recognize the great challenges facing the district. Adopting the policy edits regarding Electronic Devices with our recommendations would be an easy win. We hope the committee will see PPUP/ PA Unplugged as a partner and resource in this effort.

Sincerely,

Judith Adelson

on behalf of PPUP / PA Unplugged

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Judith Adelson

Pittsburgh Public UnPlugged

PGHPublicUnplugged@gmail.com

"Let's change our approach to screens & social media for our kids' health."



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#3

Ben Brewer

Parent



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#4

Shirley Ann Hill

Retired PPS Teacher

#5

Rosanne Levine

Organization, Community Member

Dear Pittsburgh Board of Public Education Representatives,

Thank you so much for considering a policy for eliminating the use of personal electronic devices on school property. With the full backing of Pittsburgh Public Unplugged and Pennsylvania Unplugged, I wholeheartedly support such a bell to bell policy with minor revisions that Juditka Adelson will describe in her testimony.

I am the mother of four Pittsburgh Public Schools graduates, a former PTO president, and a former participant in many district-wide committees and task forces. Although my offspring are now adults, I remain supportive of public education in Pittsburgh as a citizen and as a taxpayer. Our region and our democracy depend on our students' abilities to function effectively in society which is directly related to education.

I have been retired from my position as a Nurse Practitioner for the last year. I spent 25 years practicing in a primary care capacity in pediatrics. Since 2011, a portion of that practice has involved behavioral health. As market penetration of smartphones and personal electronic devices as well as video gaming platforms increased, so did anxiety, depression, suicidality, inattention, poor social skills, poor school performance, and metabolic problems. These expanding issues in our patient population took up more and more of my practice, and we needed to add more practitioners to deal with all of this. Around 2016, I began to read studies correlating these issues to social media and smart phone use. Whistleblowers at tech companies revealed that executives knew that the applications were harmful and produced them anyway, incorporating purposeful persuasive design elements to increase addiction to the devices. In fact, Pittsburgh Public Schools signed on to a lawsuit of META because of the increased costs that the district incurs because of all of these problems.

Critics will say that this is "correlation, not causation", or "anecdotal evidence". However, more recent studies absolutely indicate causation, as the problems are temporally related to media use and improve when the devices are removed. There is nothing like clinical practice to demonstrate the problem, as I saw this over and over and over. When I advised that parents take away the devices, behavior worsened for a week, indicating withdrawal from an addictive device, and then improved dramatically. When I advised that students do other things instead, such as school activities, chores, volunteering, outdoor activities, in person gatherings and conversations, sports, involvement in the arts, involvement in youth or

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community groups, activities at rec centers, part-time jobs, etc., the issues dramatically improved.

Removing personal electronic devices from students from the first bell of the day to the last would give students six to eight hours a day free from these devices that are addictive and harmful.

A few parents and students will push back, saying that the students need phones in case of emergency. The National Association of School Resource Officers, as well as the PA chapter, take the clear position that students using phones in a true emergency make the situation more dangerous. Students need to pay attention to the adults in charge during an emergency; they do not need to be texting and calling their parents and creating a situation where roads are blocked and emergency responders cannot get through, airwaves are jammed, phones vibrate or make noise revealing location, and rumors and misinformation are spread. My own daughter is a teacher at a public school in the Bronx that has experienced four lockdowns since a bell to bell device ban has been in effect. In each case, the school personnel were able to keep the students safe.

During the policy committee hearing, the question came up as to whether we have data from schools that have already implemented such a policy. I would suggest that you call superintendents and principals in districts where bell to bell policies have been implemented, such as Penn Hills, McKeesport, Woodland Hills, Sto-Rox, Erie McDowell, Seneca Valley, Clairton, Bucks County, and more. They will tell you that there are far fewer fights, there are increased test benchmark scores, there is increased participation in school activities, library book loans are up, students are not making Tik Tok videos in the bathroom or videoing everyone who comes in or out of the bathroom, students are not ordering food and letting people in through the side doors of the buildings, students are not videoing fights or sexting during school, and the students actually talk to each other during lunch.

I strongly urge you to pass a bell to bell personal electronic device policy, with exceptions if needed for IEPs or 504 plans or medical use, but without exceptions for emergencies or principal discretion as to whether students can hold onto their phones. Principals should have discretion as to how to collect and store the phones. Such a policy is long overdue.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosanne Levine

#6

Sandra Woolley

Organization, Grandparent

Community Schools – The Way to Develop A Plan with All Stakeholders

Good evening!

I am Dr. Sandra Woolley. I am a retired educator, a grandparent of former PPS students and Chair of the Public Education Task Force of PIIN.

PIIN is an interfaith group of 30 congregations and organizations focused on Justice.

First, thank you to the former Board of Directors for voting “NO.”

Thank you for listening to the parent and community voices who believe The Plan is not ready.

- They believe The Plan focuses too much on facilities and finances.
- Many believe students will continue to leave PPS if you move forward with this Plan.

So, I ask the new Board to not move forward, but rather to begin again with ideas from all the Stakeholders to develop a truly Visionary Plan.

- A Plan that will attract students and families back to the PPS District.
- A plan that will finally impact the Achievement Gap between Whites and Blacks.

In 2016 PPS Directors approved **Policy 122, Community Schools**, which states that the Board is committed to creating Community Schools including finding sustaining funding.

A Community School is a public school—the hub of its neighborhood, uniting families, educators and community partners, creating educational excellence for each and every child, and strengthening families and Communities. Source: Institute for Educational Leadership, <https://iel.org/>)

- Pittsburgh currently has nine Community Schools, with Site Managers, and a District Coordinator, Leana Creighton.

- **I believe that empty buildings can be filled with agencies providing the services students and families need.**
- This is not new. It being done in Erie County, Lehigh Valley, and in most States.

Continued

Community Schools are not a program, but rather a way of organizing a district.

I believe that Community Schools Committees at the District and School levels provide the structure for Developing the Reorganization Plan.

- The Steering Committee should include leaders of the City, the County, Non-profits, Corporations, Foundations, and Legislators.
- **The District must be willing to share Decision-making.**
- In turn, **The District will receive help in creating a Visionary Plan and resources to carry out the Plan.**

The Public wants to be involved in developing the Plan, not just opportunities to react to a Plan already developed.

I know of three groups who have advanced ideas.

- 412 Justice has been asking for transparency throughout the process.
- Black Women for Better Schools (BW4BS) has many visionary ideas and has endorsed many of you as you have stepped up to serve at Directors.

I thank for assuming this unpaid and time-consuming role.

- An alternative plan, “PPS Community Schools” [pps.communityschools.org] was presented to Dr. Walters by a group of parents and community members.

PIIN is also ready to work with you. I thank you for listening.



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#7

Billy Hileman

Union

#8

Emily Sawyer

Parent, Substitute Teacher

Emily Sawyer, parent of 4 PPS students at Perry, Manchester, and Schiller, and one PPS graduate from Perry (class of 2024).

15.02 Property tax increase

- I don't have a problem with raising taxes. Taxes are an integral part of a society. I do, however, have a problem with all the tax rebates, deferments, and abatements that we give to corporations and developers, the exact people who can most easily afford to pay their taxes while continuing to increase the load on those who can least afford to pay their taxes.
- Paying taxes should be a respected aspect of being a part of the community and society of the city of Pittsburgh, and businesses and developers who want to do work here should see that as part of their responsibility as part of a place that values and takes care of its people, places, and things. It should be a selling point that Pittsburgh is the kind of place that doesn't give tax breaks to the richest at the cost of its everyday people. We think this is impossible, that tax abatements and whatnot are the "cost of doing business," but that doesn't have to be the way it is. Everything is made up, and we can just decide to make something else up.
- We need to seriously consider if the homestead adjustment is sufficient for long-time, low-income, and/ or fixed-income folks given the strains on everyone's finances at this time in light of property tax increases from all three local taxing bodies basically at the same time.

8.13 Cell phone policy

- The most important thing is a consistent, districtwide policy that applies to all schools

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and students (with all the appropriate exceptions made for IEPs and other instances when accommodations are required). That reduces discretion that leads to bias, and makes expectations clear and consistent. Accountability for campus administration, staff, and teachers to apply this policy appropriately is a must.

- Schools don't have the capacity for managing cell phones because there is no time and people to do so. A cell phone ban is admittedly a bandaid for our unwillingness or inability to help teach our kids in schools how to manage and use screens in a healthy and productive way.

- Any ban should be accompanied by curriculum and training specifically at the elementary level that engages kids around the cost and benefits of screens/ technology and social media, expanding SEL and restorative culture and practice so that children know how to treat each other and deal with conflict and care about schools and each other in ways that mean they don't want to cause harm, and media and AI literacy so our students can be safe and savvy users of technology.

- This same type of training can be delivered to middle and high school students as well, but the format might need to be different since it would be dealing with humans who already have habits, patterns, and needs shaped by their previous technology usage.

- Schools are for learning. Simply banning something is a disservice to our students. In addition to curriculum as outlined above, capacity should be built with time and staff to make it possible to engage around phones, tech, social media, etc rather than just banning it.

- If the idea is that all communication between home and school would be through the office, then office staff must adjust their attitudes about such needs. I have seen these needs rebuffed or treated in an insulting way that is already unacceptable but would be completely beyond the pale if this is the only communication route available. Often, staff in the office are overwhelmed by lack of staff and overwork, so these conditions would need to be remedied as well. As with most (every?) thing(s), this is both interior work on our attitudes as adults AND a resources issue.

5.03 Tull grant

- It is imperative that the disbursement decisions regarding this grant be made with equity at the forefront, ensuring that schools with the largest needs and least support currently get access to these funds.
- Additionally, it is imperative that these disbursements are tracked and recorded and publicly reported along with all other grants, donations, and any other private resources coming into our schools so that we can get a full picture of all the resources campuses are actually working with. Without accounting for all these funds and other resources in our budgeting, we cannot possibly fund our schools equitably. Not accounting publicly for private funds on a school by school basis simply covers up resource hoarding and protects the most privileged at the expense of the most underserved.

8.12 Course of Study

- As of 9am, Monday December 15, 2025, there was no document attached to this agenda item.
- Another equity issue that is rarely discussed is the access to a full complement of enriching, interesting, and appropriate classes for ALL of PPS's students. In last year's course catalog, well over 50% of the fine arts courses were offered only at CAPA.

10.14 KDKA agreement

- Who decides what schools get showcased? Is there tracking? This is again an equity issue if the District is not ensuring that all schools get to benefit from this contract.

15.05 2026 General Fund Budget

- At the agenda review there was a bit of discussion about central office vacancies in the budget that haven't been filled but have been deemed "still needed" and are intended to be staffed. Director Taliaferro asked about what we can do to get these roles filled, some of which have been unfilled for years and years. I think one big but easy to overlook

lever is District culture, which, luckily enough for us, is already set to be a major focus in the coming years because of the Future Ready Plan. The question is whether or not we will do this important, transformative work – much of which is interior work and requires us to change ourselves to BE different, rather than being something we DO or impose on others.

Future Ready Plan

I think there is some great possibility in the position we are in, to move forward with items from the plan that we have agreement on, to build trust, and to remove some of the interest convergence that allows the most privileged to advocate for something that looks like justice when we are really just protecting and hoarding our resources. This can put us in an even stronger position to make hard choices that truly pave the way for justice and equity, not just platitudes and patchy, ineffective “fixes.” Below, I discuss three possible areas we can continue our work in.

Equitable Resource Distribution

Who do (you) we have the resources for? Equitable resource distribution can be done regardless of the amount of resources we have, so acting like we just need more resources or less-stretched resources just won’t cut it. You can equitably distribute resources any time you decide to do it. As indicated above with item 5.03, this requires accounting for, tracking, and reporting ALL resources by campus and ensuring that ALL resources are being considered in an equitable distribution framework.

But, so far, you have proven that you aren’t interested in doing the actual work of equity. One meaningful example is the recently approved sponsorship policy 802.1, adopted in May 2025. In response to questions about including equity guardrails to ensure sponsorships are equitably distributed, the District solicitor directly rejected the idea saying if we did that with this policy, we’d have to review every policy and include equity guardrails. Directly rejected the work of equity. Despite the fact that the District’s own September 2023 Racial Equity Audit

recommended exactly that – “ Conduct legal-equity analysis of district-wide policies.” In order to actually do the work of equity, and not just talk the talk, every policy, practice, and “bit of institutional culture” must be reimagined with a commitment to equity and justice as the lens and measuring rod. 1

“On a practical level, equity initiatives should NEVER focus on adjusting anything about people who are marginalized. Equity efforts should focus instead on eliminating the conditions that marginalize people.”²

Culture Change

When it comes to culture change, we are talking about an attitude adjustment. We are talking about a way WE have to be, not something we have to do. People who locate the source of the problem as existing within rather than pressing upon a marginalized group require a significant ideological reckoning before they can effectively implement solutions.³

3 Gorski, Paul and Swalwell, Katie. “Fix Injustice, Not Kids and Other Principles for Transformative Equity

Leadership.” ACSD, 2023.

2 Gorski, Paul and Swalwell, Katie. “Fix Injustice, Not Kids and Other Principles for Transformative Equity

Leadership.” ACSD, 2023.

1 Gorski, Paul and Swalwell, Katie. “Fix Injustice, Not Kids and Other Principles for Transformative Equity

Leadership.” ACSD, 2023.

Magnets/ Gifted

“There simply is no way to restructure systems of advantage and disadvantage without making some of the people accustomed to advantage panicky.”

We (white people) have been the sand in the gears of any effort to create truly just and equitable public schools. Literally at every turn. I refuse to be told that you have to cater to those threatening to leave just because that’s what you’ve always done. I refuse to believe that we can’t do better and that this time can’t be different. Just because it’s theoretical doesn’t mean it can’t be done. Everything is always a theory until it is done.

I keep hearing us say we value integration and equity, but I also keep hearing the unspoken caveats: as long as we get to keep our special, exclusive place; as long as it isn’t hard; as long as we don’t have to risk anything. We are going to have to deal with the reality eventually that we are part of the problem. WE are segregating the district. We continue to send our kids to Montessori and CAPA even though they are the most segregated spaces in the district. Perry is overwhelmingly Black because white people who live in the attendance zone choose not to send their kids there, not because the catchment is segregated. A new northview as proposed would only be segregated if white people choose not to send their kids there. Are we clinging to magical thinking that somehow equity will materialize without anything fundamentally changing? If so, who does that protect?

“We reach meaningful diversity and inclusion through equity, not vice versa.” 3

I take umbrage with the idea that we just need to “expand what is working” or find out the “secret ingredients” and replicate them elsewhere. Is that possible? If so, why are we so protective of our “special places” when they can just be recreated? Are there “secret ingredients” or are there just more resources? “Identifying what works (“secret ingredients”) and taking it to scale is always considered instead of redistribution... Suburban liberal voters are most liberal on the things that are furthest from their lives, those things that aren’t asking them

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to make any sacrifice.” 4

Magnet schools, like charters, are mitigating tactics in a system designed to create winners and losers, a system designed to sort young people into slots in an economic system that relies on the exploitation of some to the benefit of others. A mitigation tactic can never be a solution. It can always only be a placeholder for true systemic change and justice across the system.

“Mitigation tactics are often rewarded especially if they are high on optics. Even those committed to protecting the existing distributions of access and opportunities can get on board with mitigation (“nibbling around the edges” ie multicultural arts fairs and diversity celebrations).” 5

4 “Have You Heard” podcast, episode 134. April 21, 2022

“Magnets and charters are “starfish” initiatives, helping a relatively small number of students “escape” inadequate school conditions without addressing those conditions institutionally.” 5

“The trouble isn’t necessarily the presence of the mitigation tactic (unless it does more harm), but the absence of a more transformative equity commitment and action (it can be both/and so long as it really is both/and).” 5

How can we, the white and most privileged, insist that we are pro-public education while insisting on protecting public school choice policies that were designed to and always have privileged those of us who already have the most privilege? 6

When it comes to Magnets and whether they are serving their purpose, I think we need to ask:

● Are magnet schools actually better schools or are they just exclusive places where the schools get to pick the students and therefore tend to serve those whose families have

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the most capacity and who are most likely to be successful in the ways we measure success in the education system.

● Are magnets over-resourced and intensifying under-resourcing at the very schools that tend to serve the students with the most needs and challenges?

● Many PPS magnet schools are “integrated” that is true, but at what cost to the sending schools? Are we further racially isolating students at the sending schools? When students move to a magnet are they increasing or decreasing racial isolation at the magnet or the sending school? What are the impacts when talent, ability, and capacity to access training are concentrated at magnets for clubs, extracurriculars, sports, etc? How does this impact or compound disadvantage at schools that are already subjected to organized abandonment?⁷ (see end note 1)

● When, as parents and caregivers, we say the neighborhood school we are assigned to can’t give our kid what they need, I wonder if those conditions exist precisely because we don’t send our kids there?

● And, if we feel that a school can’t give our kid what they need, then surely there are other kids at that school who also need what our kid needs and aren’t getting it, and we shouldn’t be ok with that. We can’t just keep opting ourselves out of conditions that are imposed on others and expect the world to be equitable and just. It’s not a thought exercise, it’s real life and our choices matter. We create the conditions that exist in the world.

“We are a district that wants things to be better, but for nothing to change.”

– Monic Behnken

⁷ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*. New York: Verso, 2022.

⁶ Aggarwal, Ujju. “Unsettling Choice.” University of Minnesota Press, 2024.

⁵ Gorski, Paul and Swalwell, Katie. “Fix Injustice, Not Kids and Other Principles for Transformative Equity Leadership.” ACSD, 2023.

End Notes

1. Organized abandonment: “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”⁷

#9

Gordon Mitchell

Parent

Beware Exceptions in the Electronic Devices Policy Gordon R. Mitchell (PPS parent)

Prepared written testimony before the Pittsburgh Board of Education
December 15, 6 p.m. Public Hearing
Pittsburgh Public Schools Administration Building, Pittsburgh, PA

Directors, thank you braving the icy cold weather to listen to our comments tonight.

I'm urging you to please revise and pass a strong Electronic Devices policy that keeps personal smartphones out of our schools, while at the same time carving out a defined space for instructional use of school-issued electronic devices.

The Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee voted last week to advance Senate Bill 1014, which would enact a statewide "bell-to-bell phone-free policy." Let's make it a goal so that when that bill eventually passes in Harrisburg, PPS already has an evidence-based policy in place that aligns with state legislation.

As you continue marking up the draft of the Electronic Devices policy, please consider narrowing and clarifying the exceptions. Phones and other personal electronic devices should be put away from "bell-to-bell" — the entire school day, with limited, clearly defined carve-outs: documented medical needs, IEP/504 requirements, and translation or accessibility support. That's it.

However, an initial draft of the policy being considered by the Board's Education Committee contains two other broad exceptions, one allowing personal devices for unspecified "health, safety or emergency reasons" and the other for "approved classroom or instructional-related activities."

Policy flexibility is generally a good thing, but ambiguous wording can be an unwelcome gift to school officials who will be asked to interpret the vague code when the inevitable flood of requests for exceptions arrive.

One way to sharpen the "health, safety or emergency reasons" language is to bring it in line with the PA Senate Bill 1014 that allows for use of an electronic device due a student's medical condition, documented by a medical provider.

For greater clarity, PA Unplugged recommends removing the "approved classroom or instructional-related activities" exception in the current draft policy, in part to relieve pressure on teachers to monitor student cellphone use. They already have enough to worry about looking after the school-issued electronic devices.

In fact, "Teachers in schools with lenient cell phone policies are 21 percentage points more likely to lose more than an hour of learning time each week to managing cell phone use," a 2024 survey of over 1,000 middle-school and high-school teachers found.¹

Just as policy vagueness can be an albatross for administrators, teachers also suffer from the heightened labor demands required to implement decentralized device policies. Listen to Brandie Provenzano, a high school English teacher in Prince William County, Virginia: "I'm

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always teaching to divided attention. There's one eye on me, and one eye on the phone. When we tell them to put it away, it's not like they're defiant. They do put them away. But then you see them leaning over, trying to look in their backpack and read their messages, or they have to go to the bathroom to go read their messages.”²

A clear policy can mean it doesn't have to be this way for PPS teachers.

1 Khristian Mecom and Alina Lehtinen-Vela, “Teacher Survey: Cell Phone Bans Lead to Safter Environment and More Learning Time,” Study.com, August 2024,
<https://teachinglicense.study.com/featured-insights/mobile-bans-increase-engagement-and-learning-time.html>

2 Quoted in Mecom and Lehtinen-Vela, “Cell Phone Bans.”



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#10

Dr. Allyce Pinchback-Johnson

Community Member



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#11

Valerie Webb-Allman

Parent



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#12

Rachel Schlosser

Parent



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#13

Kari Thompson

Parent



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#14

Diane Zeitlman

Teacher/Staff, Organization PFT



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#15

Michael Cummins

Parent



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#16

Shannon Striner

Parent



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#17

April Clisura

Parent, School Bus Driver