



Pittsburgh Public Schools Three Rivers Wildflower Montessori Charter School Public Hearing
Testimonies
December 16, 2025

#1

Stephanie Lapine

Teacher/Staff



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#2

Dave Carlton

Parent



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#3

Belle Carlton

Student

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#4

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).

I am not a supporter of charter schools. And my kids used to attend a charter school. I learned more, I have a privileged positionality, and so now I make different choices; but as much as I would like to claim some moral high ground, I don't believe it's a simple issue. I know that charters, like magnets, inject choice into the system for certain folks who have not usually had choice in this system. The reality is, though, that "choices" such as these are situated within the "logic" of meritocracy and presented as equitable and neutral if only all parents/ caregivers had the time, skills, and capacity to navigate them. This ignores the structural injustices of the system within which such educational "choices" are embedded.

1 We also know that charters, like magnets, funnel resources and capital of all kinds away from true public schools. Because of this, I believe that charters are, in the end, an ineffective strategy. They divide us against ourselves. It is possible, of course, to change how charters impact our education system. We could fund charters differently and hold them accountable to the same rules and standards as true public schools. We could make for-profit charter operators illegal and crack down on bad-actors in the sector. We could insist that charters actually serve an innovative purpose and

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deliver otherwise unavailable services. These are absolutely within our locus of influence. But,

focusing on your locus of control, the strategy must be to ensure that we are creating true public

schools that are humanizing, excellent, and meet the needs of every student and our

communities. This way no one gets left behind in an increasingly “choice”-based system where

schools get to pick their students. There could be room for certain types of charter schools in a

system like this, I suppose, but the need for them might no longer exist.

Charters are part of an effort to turn education into a commodity (ultimately meaning some

people will not be able to access it) and families and students into consumers of educational

resources who get what they “deserve” or can afford rather than people who need & want to

learn in order to be full and active members of our society. PPS uses these same logics of

competition and consumerism to “sell” public schools of choice (i.e. magnets) to keep certain

types of families “in” the school district. In this way, both charters and magnets serve a narrative

of inclusion that is actually based on the exclusion of certain “others.”

2 “Charters, like magnets, are mitigation tactics, helping a relatively small number of students

‘escape’ inadequate school conditions without addressing those conditions institutionally. 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).” 3 This does not mean that all charter schools are acting nefariously, but that

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within the system of funding, accountability, and competition we currently have, charter schools (and magnets) can undermine our ability to publicly educate all students. As I said above, it is imperative that you focus on what is within your locus of control.

All that being said, I think it is terribly important that we interrogate the real issue at hand with this particular charter application – that the school district has allowed a problematic school leader to maintain their position at our Montessori magnet, has broken trust with families, and has alienated a beloved teacher and Montessori expert such that they feel they can no longer work within our public school district. What a tragedy. But I fear this is simply indicative of the culture of PPS, and unfortunately, I find any rhetoric around “culture” coming from the administration to be disingenuous at best and gaslighting at worst. Culture is built by leadership, and it is painfully obvious that our leadership is not building a human-centered, humanizing, restorative, loving culture at either the central office level or at some of the campuses. This is of grave importance. Any efforts to improve learning and outcomes will fall flat if we do not first overhaul every bit of our punitive, arbitrary, secretive, harmful culture. This must be our first priority. To their credit, the administration has already indicated the need for this work⁴. With closures off the table for the time being, we can refocus and prioritize making immediate, necessary improvements to school and district culture. While this is not easy work, it is not complicated or expensive. Much is interior, self-reflection work that adjusts how we ARE rather than being more stuff we have to DO. This self-reflective work, of course, must be coupled with changes to policy (see end

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note 1) and practice that actually operationalize equity – as recommended in the 2023 Racial Equity

Audit and directly rejected by the Board, Administration, and legal arms of the district in May 2025).

Commitment to ensure we have the time and people necessary to create a truly restorative culture

and discipline practice is imperative. Additionally, the self-reflective work of changing school and district culture must be accompanied by changes to job descriptions and job evaluations so that people are hired for and held accountable to making and maintaining culture change. This may ultimately include changes to the CBA, as well. Surveys, data gathering, and thematic analysis must be used strategically and effectively to monitor these changes just as we monitor CDT and PSSA outcomes. Culture change work cannot be an afterthought or a wish (see end note 2), it must be operationalized strategically and effectively just as we would do for instruction. This is not negotiable. There is so much more to say, but I'll stop there for now.

End Notes

1. Greer, G.H. “Who Needs the Under commons? Refuge and Resistance in Public High Schools.” Brock Education Journal, 28 (1), 2018

“In an educational context, considering policy, according to The Undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013), pushes educators to ask how the rules in our schools create, rather than respond to, fugitivity among students.”

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“Working for the equitable distribution of life chances in schools means

understanding that policy which bans particular kinds of head covers, sports jerseys, shoes, and other indicators of community membership, make fugitives of the students who wear them. To maintain equitable education—rather than hierarchies of ability, racialization, and income—it is vital that educators deeply question whether school rules disproportionately affect vulnerable people.”

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

Transformative Equity Leadership.” ACSD, 2023.

“Are we clinging to magical thinking that somehow equity will materialize without

anything fundamentally changing? If so, who does that protect?”

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

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

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

4 Superintendent email, November 17, 2025

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#5

Dana Warren

Community Member

November 14, 2025

To Whom It May Concern:

As a Licensed Clinical Social Worker providing therapy and supervision in the Pittsburgh community, I am writing to express my full support for the opening of The Three Rivers Wildflower Montessori School.

Throughout my work with children, adults, and families, I have seen firsthand how environment shapes emotional health and learning. The Montessori approach, grounded in respect, independence, and hands-on exploration creates the kind of nurturing atmosphere where children thrive both academically and socially. It aligns beautifully with trauma-informed principles by fostering safety, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.

Montessori education nurtures the whole child. It encourages curiosity, emotional regulation, empathy, and intrinsic motivation, skills that are foundational to lifelong resilience and holistic well-being. These are not only academic outcomes but essential human capacities that contribute to healthier families and stronger communities.

The establishment of The Three Rivers Wildflower Montessori School represents a meaningful investment in our children's development and in the long-term wellness families and of our community. I fully support this initiative and commend the founder and her board for their commitment to creating an inclusive, nurturing space where children can learn and grow with confidence.

Please feel free to contact me at ddwarren2@gmail.com if additional information or support is needed.

With appreciation and support,
Dana D. Warren, LCSW
Licensed Clinical Social Worker
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania



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#6

Cierra Maloney

Parent

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#7

Richard White

Community Member

Rev. Richard D. White, Pastor

12/9/2025

To Whom It May Concern:

As a pastor serving the Pittsburgh community, I am writing to express my heartfelt support for the opening of The Three Rivers Wildflower Montessori School.

In ministry, I have the privilege of walking alongside children, families, and individuals from all walks of life. I've witnessed how a nurturing environment shapes a child's growth academically, emotionally, and spiritually. The Montessori approach is rooted in respect, independence, and the hands-on learning of the same values we uphold in faith communities: dignity, compassion, curiosity, and the belief that every child is uniquely gifted and skilled.

The Montessori education model encourages empathy, cooperation, and a love of learning. It also strengthens character and fosters resilience. These skills not only prepare children for academic success but also help nurture kindness and confidence, traits that enrich families and uplift the community at large.

In addition to my role in ministry, I also write from personal experience as a former student at Pittsburgh Public School, Homewood Montessori (K-5), which sadly no longer exists. The early formative years that I spent there has left a lasting impression on me. I remember being encouraged to explore, ask questions, and to learn at my own pace by teachers such as the former, Mrs. Elise Bennett, who created an environment that valued respect, independence, and care for others.

I believe the establishment of The Three Rivers Wildflower Montessori School represents a meaningful investment in our children's future and in the well-being of the families we serve and generations to come. I commend the founder, her board and staff for their commitment, dedication, and vision in creating an inclusive space where children can explore, flourish, and grow.

It is with great confidence that I offer my support for this important and timely initiative.



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Set In Order By My Hand,

Rev. Richard D. White

Pastor, Morning Star Baptist Church

**Electronically Signed 12/15/2025*

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#8

Kari Thompson

Parent

(Please See Attachments)

Charter School Reckoning

Charter School Reckoning Disillusionment



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#9

Sara Vins Bobish

Parent



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#10

Beth Reiners

Parent, Community Member



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#11

Shannon Striner

Parent



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#12

Michael Cummins

Parent