



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#1

Darlene Yanakos

Parent

#2

Natalie Antonucci

Parent

Montessori Testimony for Public Hearing on Mon. Feb. 23rd

Hi, my name is Natalie Antonucci, and I am a parent of current PreK3 and Kindergarten students at Pittsburgh Montessori. I am also the Secretary of the Pittsburgh Montessori PTA and I would consider myself a highly involved parent at the school.

I am speaking here today because I found the remarks about shutting down the Montessori program at last week's School Board meeting to be incredibly disheartening, concerning, and, honestly, shocking. I have been following the developments of the Facilities Utilization plan somewhat closely over the past couple of years, and until last week, I had never heard a real mention of completely shutting down Montessori. As it stands, I am still unsure whether this was just a simple comment or this is a deeper conversation that the Board has been having, and we should be seriously concerned about the continuation of our program? As a Montessori community, we would like to know the answer to that.

Montessori is a huge asset to our district, and losing it would be devastating. Sure, at face value, I could see why closing Montessori would seem like the fair thing to do - when all of the other K-5 magnet schools are slated to close. That would make things "equal". However, equality is not one of the guiding principles of the Future-Ready Plan, but EQUITY is. Taking away a thriving, high-demand, high-performing school for the sake of being equal is not equity. In fact, you would be robbing every single child in the district of the opportunity to attend such an exemplary school. How about instead,

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

remove the barriers, so that any child that wants to attend Montessori would be able to do so? That is the space where equity meets excellence, two of the foundational pillars of the Future-Ready Plan. Take what is working and build upon it - don't take it away!

I know that student retention is also a fundamental goal of the Future-Ready plan, and Montessori is a definite draw for the district. Cutting the school out entirely, would also take with it those families who do not want to send their child to a completely traditional elementary school. It is a real asset that PPS is able to offer a unique option to families across the district.

To close, I would like to make an offering - come visit our school! If you have not been there to see the great work that our teachers, staff, and students do, please call the school and set up a tour! They would be happy to show you everything so that you can have a better understanding of our school and see for yourself what makes Montessori unique.

#3

Alex Antonucci

Parent

Good evening members of the Board,

I want to begin by recognizing the extraordinary amount of time, analysis, and community engagement that has gone into the facility utilization plan. District-wide planning at this scale is complex and I know it has gone underappreciated. It is clear to me that significant effort and resources have gone into this work, and I want to acknowledge that.

In last week's board meeting, the idea to close Pittsburgh Montessori alongside the other K-5 schools in the district was floated. I'm here tonight to urge you to maintain the current plan that allows the district's public Montessori program to remain open.

If equity is our shared goal, then the public Montessori program represents an opportunity—not a problem.

First, it has the highest waitlist in the district. Families across Pittsburgh are actively seeking this model. High demand reflects trust and perceived value. When families are competing for access to a public program, that tells us something important about what they believe works for their kids.

Second, in 2025 the school's PSSA scores in grades 3-5 exceeded district averages. At a time when we are focused on closing achievement gaps and improving outcomes for all students, this is not a marginal program. It is a high-performing one.

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

Third, and most importantly, equity is best achieved by expanding access to high quality public programs, not eliminating them.

If a school is popular, academically strong, and deeply valued by families, the district's equity strategy should be to study it, learn from it, and replicate elements of its success in additional communities. Closing Montessori would narrow this opportunity.

I would argue that my personal affinity for Montessori is irrelevant. What matters is whether it aligns with a vision that has the potential to serve students across the district. This is not about preserving some niche program. It is about recognizing an evidence-aligned, in-demand model and asking how it can serve MORE kids.

I urge you to keep the Montessori program intact and to treat it as a foundation for expansion rather than elimination.

Thank you for your leadership and your continued commitment to our students and families.

Alex Antonucci



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#4

Maryellen Hamel

Community Member



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#5

Hallie Pritts

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#6

Martha Riecks

Parent

#7

Shirley Ann Hill

Retired PPS Teacher

PUBLIC HEARING - SHIRLEY ANN HILL

February 23, 2026

I have followed the public hearings regarding the unfair treatment of former Montessori teacher Ms. Stephanie Lapine by principal Kellie Meyer. Throughout my 41-year career with PPS, I too was subjected to toxic principals like her. In December 2023, Ms. Stephanie Lapine was removed from her classroom by Kellie Meyer. She was cleared in February 2024 but was "conveniently transferred" to another school that does not have a Montessori program. Because you chose to completely ignore Kellie Meyer's toxic behavior, Ms. Stephanie Lapine will be starting her own Montessori school. Why is Kellie Meyer not being held accountable for her unfair treatment of Ms. Stephanie Lapine (the only lead black teacher)? Some Montessori teachers have filed grievances and still nothing has been done. Toxic principals like Kellie Meyer put fear in teachers who speak up by sabotaging their teacher evaluations. Pretending there are no problems at Montessori definitely creates an unsettling work environment. Teachers should not have to adapt to this leadership style to keep their jobs. Some principals are good for "conveniently cutting" positions when you speak up. I question how students are first when toxic principals are not held accountable. Dr. Sacco - Have you talked to Kellie Meyer regarding her toxic leadership that has been going on for years?

Carrick High School has a very small percentage of Black teachers. A Black History Month Moment: "Paul Lawrence Peeler Sr. became the first African American teacher hired by the Pittsburgh Public Schools system. He taught music at the elementary and junior high school levels from 1936 until his retirement in 1970. As the district's first full-time

African American educator, Peeler was a pioneer in black education. His perseverance in overcoming racist discriminatory practices during the pre-WWII era helped to usher in a new generation of African American educators, including John Brewer, Helen Faison, Doris Brevard, and other educators who would diversify and integrate Pittsburgh Public Schools." (Samual Black, 2017 - Heinz History Center) **BLACK STUDENTS AT CARRICK MATTER!!**

#8

Aaliyah Taylor

Student

Good evening everyone. My name is Aaliyah, and I'm a senior at Pittsburgh Allderdice. First, I just want to say thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak tonight.

I transferred to Allderdice in 10th grade, and from the start, I knew I was stepping into a school that takes academics seriously. The classes here are challenging—in a good way. They push you to think deeper, work harder, and really prepare for what comes next. The programs offered at Allderdice are top tier, and I truly believe they have set me up for success after graduation. As a senior getting ready for college, I feel confident. I'm not just hoping I'm prepared—I know I am.

Our counselors have also played a big role in that. They've helped me understand the college process, from applications to scholarships, and they've made sure I know what steps to take. That guidance matters, especially when you're trying to be the best version of yourself and plan for your future.

One of my favorite classes right now is forensics. It's helped me build critical thinking skills and learn how to analyze evidence and arguments. I plan to study law in college and eventually go to law school because my goal is to become a criminal defense attorney. I've always had a passion for advocating—for myself and for others. Speaking up when something isn't right isn't just something I do; it's part of who I am. And the Superintendent's Student Advisory Council has given me opportunities to grow that voice.

That's why I say I'm PPS Proud. I'm proud of the education I've received. I'm proud of the teachers who challenge me. I'm proud of the programs that have helped shape my future.

However, being proud doesn't mean ignoring areas that need improvement.

One issue that I believe needs more attention at Allderdice is racial tension. It's something that can be heard in conversations and felt in the atmosphere. Sometimes it shows up in small comments. Sometimes it shows up in bigger ways. But either way, it's there. I've personally witnessed and experienced moments where I felt a lack of respect for me and my experiences as a Black student. And that can be discouraging.

I've been involved in AACAS, and that space has been valuable. It's allowed students like me to be heard and to support one another. But I also believe that more can be done. I would encourage Dr. Walters and the Board Members to seriously consider implementing stronger diversity and cultural competency training at Allderdice. Not just as a one-time workshop, but as an ongoing commitment. Because waiting until something unfortunate happens is not the solution.

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

I love my school. I believe in its potential. And I believe that by addressing these issues openly and honestly, we can make Allderdice not just academically excellent, but emotionally and culturally supportive for all students.

Thank you again for listening and for caring about our voices.

#9

Christian Miller

Student

Good evening, Dr. Walters, Executive Cabinet, and Board members. My name is Christian Miller. I am an 11th-grade student at Westinghouse High School. I am a part of the PPS Wilksburg collaboration. I have been at Westinghouse since the 7th grade. Unfortunately, I have experienced 3 principals since I have been here. I hope Dr. Hill will remain through my senior year and beyond. I believe the students of Westinghouse deserve stability.

Not only am I an active member of the Superintendent's Student Advisory Council, but I am also a member of the National Honor Society.

I believe Westinghouse should have more activities. I think this is a natural way to keep students engaged and involved. Oftentimes, students who are not a part of a team, club, or sport, such as basketball or football, may feel they have no reason to go to class. Clubs and activities can help students feel a part of a community. Community is very important because everyone wants to feel left out. Clubs help students form bonds and can influence one another positively.

I understand that in the past, Westinghouse High School had one of the strongest bands in the city. Can we consider bringing back the band and working out an activities period so that students do not miss academic courses? Unfortunately, not all students have the privilege of being able to stay after school, which is why a built-in activities period becomes very important for the students who would like to pursue band and even a choir.

I would like to take a moment to speak about the lunches that are served to students in the district, well let me speak about Westinghouse. A lot of students rely on food from school, the district may look at the nutritional value, and I understand they have too, but the food they feed us is trash. Sometimes you look at the food, and it's unrecognizable and flavorless. I once bit into an apple that was black in the core. We have to take a gamble on the fresh produce being fresh. A fellow student reported that there was mold in her milk. PPS, it is unacceptable to feed students in this manner. I understand that not all school lunches are equal. Once again, the food served in our cafeteria raises equity issues. I would like to invite any member of the Board of Directors, particularly Tawana Cook Purnell, to come and sit down and have lunch with me and my fellow classmates at Westinghouse. I would like you to

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

see first hand the meals that are served. And perhaps taking a look into the behavior of the 6-8 students may help in the decision to return schools to K-5, 6-8, and 9-12.

Respectfully submitted,

Christian Miller

#10

Javere Harriot

Student

My name is Javere Harriott, and I am a junior student at Westinghouse and a proud member of the Superintendent’s Student Advisory Council. I have been a student within the Pittsburgh Public Schools district since 7th grade at Westinghouse, and throughout my time here, I have witnessed several changes in our school’s environment—changes that have often led me to question the trajectory of our institution.

However, under the leadership of Dr. Virginia Hill, Westinghouse Academy is being molded into the legacy institution it is destined to become. With her prior experience serving as an administrator at other schools within the district, Dr. Hill leads with students’ wants and needs at the forefront. She strives to understand the minds of today’s youth, rather than expecting us to simply move through each day without purpose or engagement.

That said, I believe that no institution can truly better itself without providing consistent, enriching, in-school nourishment beyond academics. This calls for the implementation and expansion of clubs and extracurricular activities of all kinds, whether financial literacy, helping kids grasp the financial aspect of everyday adult life, or even career readiness, to help them be aware of the different to do’s and not to do’s when it comes to that part of life. Such opportunities cultivate students’ interests, encourage leadership, inspire a deeper desire to learn, and expose them to experiences they’ve never experienced before. They allow students to explore who they are and who they aspire to become after this chapter of their lives, and help them succeed in their next step of life. By motivating kids to invest in extracurricular development, we are not only strengthening our school culture, but this added curriculum would help them build a well-decorated resume when applying for the workforce or higher level education, and also keep the future presidents,

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

entrepreneurs, and or CEOs out of harm's way.

Instead of feeding into the negativity that surrounds our schools, we should instead transform our buildings into institutions where our students of PPS can come, learn, and explore different opportunities.

Thank You

#11

Liniya Mallory

Student

Good evening members of the board, administrators, staff, parents, and fellow students. My name is Liniya Mallory and I appreciate the opportunity to speak today. I have been attending Pittsburgh Allderdice since May 2023.

I am here today because students care deeply about our education and the environment we learn in every single day. We walk into this building ready to grow, to challenge ourselves, and to prepare for our futures. But learning does not happen in isolation. It happens in spaces where students feel supported, respected, and understood. When student concerns are overlooked, the impact goes far beyond grades. It affects motivation. It affects mental health. It affects our sense of belonging. Most importantly, it affects whether we believe our voices truly matter. We show up. We work hard. We meet the expectations that are set for us. In return, we ask for something simple but powerful: understanding, respect, and a genuine willingness to listen.

The decisions made in this room do not stay on paper. They do not remain in policy documents or meeting minutes. They follow us into our classrooms, our hallways, our schedules, and our daily routines. They shape how safe we feel, how supported we feel, and how successful we can be. When students feel unheard, it creates distance between students and leadership. But when students feel valued, it builds trust. And trust is the foundation of any successful school community.

As students, we are the ones living these policies every day. We experience firsthand how decisions impact our learning environments, our workloads, our extracurricular

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

opportunities, and our overall well-being. That perspective is not secondary — it is essential. Student input is not a delay to progress. It is not a challenge to authority. It is a resource. It is insight. It is lived experience.

We are not asking for perfection. We understand that not every decision will satisfy everyone. What we are asking for is consideration. Transparency. Clear communication. We are asking to be part of conversations that directly affect us. When decisions reflect the real experiences of students — not just what looks effective on paper — they are stronger, more practical, and more sustainable.

Including student voice does not weaken leadership; it strengthens it. When students are invited to share feedback in meaningful ways, engagement increases. Responsibility increases. School pride increases. Students are far more likely to support decisions when they understand how and why they were made — especially when they know their perspectives were part of the process.

I stand here calmly, respectfully, but firmly, asking that student voices be taken seriously in decision-making. Not as a formality. Not as a token gesture. But as a genuine partnership.

Because when students are heard, schools improve. When students are respected, communities grow stronger. And when students are included, outcomes are more effective for everyone.

Thank you for your time, and thank you for giving students the respect of being heard

#12

Michael Livingston

Student

Good evening. My name is Michael L., and I am a senior at Brashear High School. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

I'm here to talk about why Brashear is a great school to attend. One of the biggest strengths of Brashear is our Career and Technical Education programs. From MPAC's computer programming to Auto Tech's hands-on learning, these programs give students real skills they can use after high school. Whether students plan to go to college, trade school, or straight into the workforce, Brashear helps prepare them for life beyond the classroom.

Another strong part of Brashear is our diversity and the many opportunities students have to get involved. Our student body includes people from many different backgrounds and cultures, which creates a welcoming and supportive environment. There are also many activities and clubs for students to join. Groups like Student Council and Student Voice help students build leadership skills, while clubs like HOSA and Science Olympiad allow students to explore interests, challenge themselves, and grow both academically and personally.

If there is one thing I would like to see improved, it would be the number of AP courses offered at Brashear. While we do have some strong AP classes, we currently offer fewer than other schools in the district. Expanding AP options would give more students the chance to challenge themselves academically and earn college credit, which can make a real difference for their futures.

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

Over the past four years, Brashear has given me many opportunities to grow. I've participated in competitions, sports, and clubs that helped me connect with my school community and prepare for what comes next. Being involved in Student Council and the Superintendent's Student Advisory Council has helped shape me into the person I am today by teaching me responsibility, leadership, and confidence.

In closing, Brashear offers its students more than just an education. It provides opportunities to grow academically, personally, and socially. For these reasons and many more, Brashear is a school worth being proud of. Thank you for your time and for listening.

#13

Sebastian Bard

Student

Good afternoon, members of the board. I'd like to preface my remarks by thanking you for the opportunity to share my experience in such an impactful setting.

My name is Sebastian Bard, and I am a graduating senior at SciTech. I've been at SciTech since 6th grade- almost 7 years. As such, I've seen most of what the school has to offer: its greatest strengths, its shortcomings, and everything in between. I feel qualified to testify on SciTech's behalf- qualified to attempt to explain the special place our school inhabits in the Pittsburgh Public ecosystem.

SciTech's magnet focus isn't reserved for high school: from the very first day of 6th grade, the attention paid to creating a well rounded, in depth STEM education was evident. Before my time at SciTech, I had never taken science class in a lab. However, by the end of 8th grade I felt confident in creating research questions and attempting to answer them using the wide variety of equipment available to us.

In high school, students are given the opportunity to choose their own path, through the concentration system. SciTech's concentration system is one of its most important features: it allows students to hone in on the ideas they actually care about. I've seen students, otherwise almost completely disengaged, participate actively in the classroom when they realized that what they were learning in their concentration was applicable to their lives and aspirational careers. I believe our concentrations are what truly set scitech apart. The resources, and opportunity for exploration that they offer make it possible for students who would otherwise have no access to such diverse offerings to receive a university level understanding in subjects they will continue to reference in college and beyond.

As you continue to think about the future of our district, I hope that you will keep my experience, and the countless others like it that have stemmed from time at SciTech, in mind. I believe in the goal of leveling the playing field: I hope that whatever action the district pursues results in a fulfilling education for every PPS student. However, I would caution against equating the unique opportunities that some of our schools provide with a need to ensure that there is both a baseline and a ceiling to the quality of education that a PPS student can receive. I am hopeful that, at the conclusion of this process, SciTech will still be a school where students can pursue their goals in the same specialized and driven environment that exists today. Thank you.



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#14

Rita Porterfield

Parent, Community Member, Alumna



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#15

Jude Porterfield

Student, Community Member



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#16

Phil Porterfield

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#17

Charlie Britanik

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#18

Kara Britanik

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#19

Vanessa Dagavarian

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#20

Teaira Collins

Teacher/Staff, Parent, Organization, Community Member

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#21

Raeed Chowdhury

Parent, Community Member

Public Hearing Testimony — February 23, 2026

Pittsburgh Montessori PreK-5 / Future-Ready Plan

Opening — Personal (30 seconds)

- My name is Raeed Chowdhury. I lived in Friendship for 5 years, and I'm the parent of a student at Pittsburgh Montessori
- I spoke before this board last July about what Montessori means to the Friendship neighborhood
- Tonight, I want to talk about what it means--and could mean--for the district.

The Data (60 seconds)

- I'm here right now because I'm concerned by what I heard at a board meeting last week--that there might be reason to close the Montessori school altogether.
- The district is facing declining enrollment, and I understand the pressure to close buildings and consolidate.
- But I'd ask you to look carefully at which schools are actually working.
- Pittsburgh Montessori is the only fully public Montessori school in the state, and it ranks in the top 20% of schools statewide^[1], while the district as a whole is below state averages
- There is demand for this school--while most other schools are struggling to fill seats, the Montessori program has a long waitlist, with over three dozen students on it as of last May.^[2]
- The demand is so strong that a former Pittsburgh Montessori teacher applied to open a Montessori charter school^[3]

The Argument for Expansion (60 seconds)

- Here's what I'd like the board to consider: research supports what the data at our school already shows--a systematic review of over two thousand studies found that compared to a traditional education, a Montessori education consistently leads to better outcomes for children^[4]
- Vice President Reed has said she believes deeply in Montessori methods.
- The superintendent's own plan originally proposed keeping Montessori as the **only** elementary magnet.
- My own son, quiet and reserved as he is, has benefited greatly from the mixed-age classrooms and self-directed learning
- The method works, and it has tremendous support, from both parents and school officials.

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies February 23, 2026

- The question shouldn't be whether to close this program. The question should be: **why aren't we expanding it?**
- In a district struggling with enrollment, a proven program with a waitlist and strong outcomes isn't part of the problem. It's part of the solution.

Close — Personal + Call to Action (30 seconds)

- I chose Pittsburgh, I chose Friendship, and my family chose this school. If this district wants to attract and retain families, you need programs that families want.
- You already have one.
- Please don't close it. Invest in it.

Thank you.

-
1. <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/pittsburgh-montessori-k-5-profile> ↗
 2. www.pghschools.org/about/enrollment/magnet-schools-homepage/post-lottery ↗
 3. <https://www.wesa.fm/education/2025-12-16/ppp-considering-montessori-charter> ↗
 4. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/cl2.1330> ↗



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#22

Holly Munson

Parent

#23

Holly Cox

Parent

Hello, I'm Holly Cox and I'm the parent of a 9th grader at Allderdice and a class of 2021 Obama graduate. Our family has been in PPS since 2008. By the time my daughter graduates we'll have had 21 years in the district. In that time, I've learned policy, history and the good and bad of what PPS decisions throughout the years have done to our communities, and how this continues to play out and affect new generations of children. This new plan will also reverberate for generations to come.

I've appreciated the board members and administrators who've taken the time to really hear concerns from community members. For me, that has meant board member Yael Silk's community hours, where she answered my concerns, those of other parents, and Allderdice and Linden students. When I sent an email to the board with concerns and links to similar plans from across the country, Tracey Reed reached out and we had a great conversation.

I also went to meetings led by consultants and the district. Questions were taken, but after the meetings many people expressed frustration. They felt dismissed, that their questions weren't answered, or like their concerns just weren't taken seriously. People have questioned how many of the goals from the "goals and guardrails" sessions have been seriously considered. Online comment sections contain posts of people still confused over the basics- how is a school's capacity determined and how can we offer great education when we can't dedicate rooms for art and music? What about transportation concerns? Timely since a teenager-a minor- was kicked off a city bus and left to freeze overnight before he was taken to the hospital the next morning. Which also begs questions about accommodations for our ESL population.

This isn't new. As long as I've been in the district- and probably before- there have been

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

complaints about communication, parents not feeling heard, not getting answers from administrators. We're encouraged to use the proper means of communication, but when parents come to hearings, Board President Gene Walker dismisses the "Monday people". Virtual testimony expands the pool of who can speak at the hearings, but he tried to cut that off as well.

These actions and these meetings do not make PPS families feel like a valued partner in this plan. But when we're talking about a plan that will have sweeping changes affecting the city for many years to come, communication needs to be paramount. Thoughtful discussions with parents and community leaders about what is best for the children and their communities are what's needed.

There are grumblings that this has taken too long and that's why a vote needs to happen again to push forward. It's taken too long because there wasn't open communication to begin with. Moving forward means starting open dialogues now. To have deep discussions about what these changes mean for our schools, our communities, and our city. To consider changes- like expanding community schools in the district- that can be a benefit. To get to the specifics of how everyone can have equitable education and transportation now, not to figure it out as we go along. This is what our children deserve.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#24

Sarah Zangle

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#25

Bethani Cameron

Parent, Representing InformUp.org, A Local News Nonprofit



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#26

Heidi DeVries

Teacher/Staff, Parent

To: Pittsburgh Public Schools Board of Directors

Attn: President Gene Walker and Director Tawana Cook Purnell

Address: 341 S. Bellefield Avenue

Pittsburgh, PA 15213

**Subject: Formal Opposition to the Closure of Pittsburgh Montessori K-5 and
Recommendation for Excellence-Based Expansion**

Dear President Walker and Members of the Board,

I am writing to express my strong opposition to the proposed closure of the Pittsburgh Montessori K-5 building as part of the “Future-Ready Facilities Plan.” While I recognize that the district faces significant facilities and enrollment challenges, closing one of our highestperforming schools is a counterproductive strategy that risks accelerating enrollment decline and driving more families out of the district.

Pittsburgh Montessori K-5 is a proven asset within our school district. According to the 2026 U.S. News & World Report rankings, the school is currently ranked among the top elementary schools in the district and in the top 20% of public elementary schools statewide. With math proficiency at 67% and reading proficiency at 72%—figures that significantly exceed district averages—Montessori represents a model of academic success within an urban public school setting.

Rather than eliminating programs that are producing strong academic outcomes, I respectfully urge the Board to consider a strategy focused on expanding and replicating what works:

1. Expand the Montessori Model.

Rather than closing the Friendship building, the district could leverage it as a professional development hub—training additional PPS educators in Montessori methods and applying these high-impact instructional strategies more broadly.

2. Strengthen Enrollment Through Excellence.

Families are actively seeking high-quality public education options. By maintaining and promoting successful magnet programs like Pittsburgh Montessori, the district can attract and retain families who might otherwise choose private or charter alternatives.

3. Prioritize Academic Outcomes in “Future-Ready” Planning.

Facilities decisions should support—not undermine—academic excellence. While building efficiencies are important, eliminating a top-performing program to reduce square footage risks long-term educational and enrollment consequences that outweigh short-term savings.

Pittsburgh Public Schools should highlight and replicate its successes. Closing Pittsburgh Montessori K-5 sends the unintended message that high performance is not a priority. I respectfully ask that you vote to keep this school open and instead focus on expanding models that elevate achievement across the district.

Thank you for your consideration and your service to our community.



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

Sincerely,

Heidi DeVries

Lawrenceville Resident/ Parent and Tutor Pittsburgh Montessori School



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#27

Mark Rauterkus

Parent, Community Member



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#28

Siena Kane

Parent

#29

Ghadah Makoshi

Parent

Equity Doesn't Mean Strive for Mediocrity (It includes protection from predictable harm too)

Good evening,

Tonight I want to focus on four areas that need to be answered before any board member should feel comfortable enough to vote: students with disabilities, discipline and school policing, racial and equity impact, and transportation safety. I am not addressing budget concerns tonight since the board and administration stated last year that saving money wasn't as important as equity.

1. Students with disabilities

If school closures or reconfigurations change placements, IDEA requires IEP review and potentially new placement determinations.

- How many students with IEPs will experience a change in placement under this plan?
- How many IEP meetings will that require?
- And where, specifically, is the staffing capacity to conduct those meetings without delaying services?

This is not a small administrative issue to be dealt with last minute. It is a federal compliance issue. If the district cannot manage those transitions with precision, our most vulnerable students lose services.

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

2. Discipline and school policing

I have spoken about this before through my work at the ACLU, but when schools consolidate, disciplinary systems consolidate. Research consistently shows that disruption and school transitions increase behavioral issues, particularly in the first two years. Yet this plan does not include a mitigation strategy for out-of-school suspensions, referrals to police, arrests, or summary citations.

- What is the district's projected impact on suspension rates?
- Will truancy citations be centrally tracked and publicly reported? (Currently they are not tracked anywhere).
- What safeguards are in place to ensure consolidation does not increase student police contact? (Will there be more psychologists, social workers, and paraprofessionals hired?)

3. Equity and racial impact

Most of the proposed closures are concentrated in predominantly Black school communities.

- Where is the formal equity audit?
- What will be measured three years from now to determine whether this plan reduced or widened disparities in discipline, attendance, or academic access?

4. Transportation and attendance

The plan projects major transportation shifts and expanded walk zones.

- What is the safety analysis behind those walk zone expansions?
- Have routes been evaluated for lighting, traffic patterns, winter conditions, and crossing guard capacity?
- And what is the attendance impact model? We already have high chronic absenteeism. If transportation becomes less reliable or less safe, attendance will not improve.

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

If this plan is as strong as has been claimed, there should be no issue providing transparent answers to these questions.

Before voting, I urge this Board to ask these questions on the record, and require the following before voting:

- A disability transition and IDEA compliance plan.
- A discipline and school policing mitigation strategy.
- A formal equity impact analysis/audit.
- A transportation safety and attendance impact study.

Equity requires real work, not simply closing programs and buildings. It includes protection from predictable harm, not vague promises that everything will work out somehow.

Thank you,

Ghadah Makoshi



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#30

Andrea Grebner

Parent

#31

Ben Brewer

Parent

I am encouraging the Board to strengthen the elementary magnet school program in order to strengthen PPS.

I appreciate that the Board has a difficult and thankless job in building a future PPS that provides high-quality and equitable educational opportunities while achieving financial stability.

I do not believe that eliminating elementary magnet schools is the way to do that.

Our district is losing hundreds of students a year, and has lost 5,400 in the last decade, or 23% of enrollment.

It's not enough to close facilities no longer needed for a shrinking student population; we also need to embrace the programs that are attracting families to PPS in order to rebuild enrollment.

Two of our kids attend Montessori, which has the longest waiting list of any elementary school in the district. We should be working to expand or duplicate the unique program at Montessori rather than eliminate it as some Board members recently suggested.

Many of our friends on the North Side attend ATA, a magnet school that demographically reflects the district and has consistently demonstrated success in outcomes. We should celebrate the work of leaders and educators at ATA, not get rid of it.

Eliminating the elementary magnet school program will drive families away and make our district less diverse.

#32

Sandra Woolley

Organization, Grandparent

I was disturbed when I listened to your discussion last Monday. It seems like you will be faced with voting “for” or “against” the Plan by June with few changes .

PIIN is not trying to Kill the Plan, but we do feel it needs to be revised with more Public Input. _

We agree with your focus on Equity. We have all bemoaned the Achievement Gap for years.

Working toward Equity recognizes what research shows – When the scores of lower achieving students rise, the scores of higher achieving students rise also.

Personally, I believe my grandchildren have benefited greatly from attending public schools.

And Public Schools were created to support our Democracy.

So, what in the Plan should be changed?

PPS currently has nine Community Schools and could have many more.

PIIN believes you have an opportunity while renovating buildings and reorganizing schools to make space for other agencies providing services that children and families need.

A key feature of Community Schools is a School-based Team of All Stakeholders, Assessing the Needs of the Community and Making and Carrying out Plans.

Dr. Walters, you have already said that you will create Community Teams with Parent and Student Ambassadors to help implement the Plan. These Teams should include all the Stakeholders,

and can form the beginnings of more Community Schools.

The question is always how to fund Community Schools.

The District should not have to shoulder this cost alone.

Mayor Corey O’Connor has stated he wants to support Communities and Community Centers.

PIIN believes it is in the best interest of the City and District to work together.

To have a Strong Pittsburgh, the City needs Strong Public Schools.

And the County, Non-Profits, and Foundations should help.

Board Directors - PIIN asks you to THINK BIG!

Make Public Schools Community Centers, and families will want to stay and come back.



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

Please let PIIN know how we can help.

Thank you.

Sandra Woolley, Chair, PIIN Public Education Justice Task Force.



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#33

Shannon Striner

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#34

Mary Trigo

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#35

Emily Sawyer

Parent, Substitute Teacher



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#36

Lily Allman

Student



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#37

Valerie Webb-Alman

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#38

Danny Bracken

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#39

Jazlynn Worthy

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#40

Kari Thompson

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#41

Michael Cummins

Parent, Organization

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#42

Allison Baggiano

Parent

February 22, 2026

Dear District Leader and Board Directors,

We are writing to express our strong support for Pittsburgh Public Schools' magnet programs, and specifically for Montessori education within the public school setting. We recognize that the district is facing complex and difficult decisions. We appreciate the weight of that responsibility and respectfully ask that student outcomes and long-term community impact remain central in those discussions.

From our experience as parents, we have watched our daughter thrive in the Montessori environment. Over the past year and a half, she has demonstrated significant growth in early literacy and math, but also in independence, executive functioning, and problem-solving skills. Equally important, she has developed confidence, intrinsic motivation, and strong social emotional skills.

These outcomes are not anecdotal alone. Research on public Montessori programs shows that students often demonstrate strong academic performance, advanced self-regulation, and well-developed executive functioning skills—factors closely linked to long-term academic success. Studies also indicate that children who attend Montessori preschool programs enter kindergarten with strong readiness skills in literacy and social-emotional development, positioning them for sustained achievement.

As healthcare providers serving this community, we see Montessori's impact beyond our own family. The structure of the Montessori classroom—multi-age groupings, individualized pacing,

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

hands-on learning, and emphasis on independence—can provide an inclusive and supportive environment for neurodivergent students. For many children, this model functions as a least restrictive environment that supports autonomy while meeting diverse learning needs. In our professional observation, many of these students flourish in Montessori settings in ways that might be more difficult to achieve in traditional models.

While consolidating programs may create structural symmetry, equity requires access to varied pathways that meet diverse student needs. Removing Montessori would reduce choice and potentially limit opportunities for students who benefit from this approach. Instead, we encourage the board to view Pittsburgh Montessori as a point of pride and a model worth strengthening and expanding to increase accessibility across the district.

We also respectfully ask the board to consider the significant investments already made—specialized teacher training, which requires extensive time and financial commitment, as well as district investments in Montessori materials and classroom infrastructure.

We share these comments not in opposition, but in partnership. We value Pittsburgh Public Schools and want to see all students succeed. We believe Montessori education is one meaningful pathway toward that goal, and we urge you to preserve and build upon it for the benefit of current and future students.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.

Allison Baggiano & Daniel Feuerstein.



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#43

Sylvia Wilson

Community Member



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#44

Karen Cornell

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#45

Erin Childs

Parent

#46

Elizabeth Pitard

Teacher/Staff, Parent, Community Member

Good evening members of the Board, Dr. Walters, and members of your cabinet. My name is Elizabeth Pitard, and tonight I am speaking to you as a teacher at Pittsburgh Montessori. You may recognize my name from a letter I sent to you all this past weekend from a parent and city resident perspective. Tonight, I would like to help you understand what is valuable about Montessori education for all students.

By now, I hope that you have read the written testimony from my colleague, Jon Farinelli, who highlighted three main points that make Montessori unique and highly effective: specialized training for teachers, mixed-age classrooms, and specialized, hands-on learning materials. I would like to draw your attention to the learning materials for a moment.

When you enter my classroom, Children’s House for 3 – 6-year-olds, you will see a carefully prepared environment that is designed to facilitate the child’s learning and independence. Montessori materials are arranged with purpose, moving from lesser to greater degrees of difficulty. This enables the child to know where they are in their learning and see where they are moving to next within the curriculum.

As an example, the youngest children begin with sensorial materials. Dr. Montessori observed that children learn about their environment through their senses and designed the materials in the Sensorial area to allow for this exploration. The materials engage children in discovering qualities of size, shape, texture, weight, sound, etc. through their senses. A key component of all the materials is that they isolate one quality, such as size. For example, the cubes of the pink tower are a solid color, they only change by square

Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

centimeters. The materials are also designed to work together and I love to observe the children discover this relationship and create patterns. There are many extensions for these materials which allow children to dive deeper and enrich their learning.

The sensorial area exemplifies my favorite Montessori quote: “Education is a natural process carried out by the child and is not acquired by listening to words, but by experiences in the environment.” The child’s work with these materials also builds their capacity for mathematical thinking, as they are organizing materials by attributes. Materials are also in set of ten, laying the foundation for our decimal system. As you will hear from other testimony tonight, every material in our classroom meets multiple state standards. I am attaching a photograph of sensorial work students have completed. I encourage you to visit our school and see this learning in action.

Thank you for your time,
Elizabeth Pitard
Children’s House Teacher
Pittsburgh Montessori



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#47

Stephanie Lapine

Teacher/Staff



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#48

Ashley Rooths

Parent



Pittsburgh Public Schools Fulton Special Public Hearing Testimonies
February 23, 2026

#49

Ms. Paulette Foster

Organization