

## **April Clisura**

### **Parent**

### **Public Hearing 2/23/26 Testimony**

#### **Capitalizing on the Good that Came from the FUP process:**

I realize that the status quo is not good enough for the results we need to achieve for our district students. Now, the board is taking back up the consideration of the school and school building closures. One positive thing that did come of the facilities plan was that families started talking to each other in a more formal way, such as with the Community Plan and with different PTO/PTA groups sitting down and meeting together. I wish that instead of picking back up with the existing plan, the district would utilize that inter-school dialogue that has sprung up among the families and facilitate us in a real way to talk about solutions that come from the bottom up. The consultants and district administration's findings have served as a jumping off point for a lot of hard but good conversations.

#### **What Information Matters and to Whom?**

But we need to be honest about how much money needs to be saved in the budget for the next several years in order to keep serving our students at at least the current level, and let the schools have more input into how to accomplish that. The last process revealed that the public, albeit in close-ended survey questions, agreed that a set of stated goals are important. However, we were not asked to engage in what-ifs that come up when some of those goals can actually compromise one another. For example, I think that the goal of modernizing facilities became overly elevated in the board and district's mind because it serves the argument of closing several of our buildings - but many in the community expressed that closing buildings might actually take away from the goal of equity if it means faculty instability and too many transitions for students, without a documented plan to increase, not decrease, the amount of learning, behavioral and mental health supports available to students, not to mention transportation concerns.

#### **Sometimes Best Practices Research Points in Conflicting Directions**

Another thing that the process we already went through has revealed is that there's sometimes a tension between different best practices. For example, I have a social science background and I always heard about research that found the achievement levels of lower-income students tend to be higher when they are in a school with mixed economic backgrounds as opposed to when they are in a school with homogeneously low-income students. And I assume that the school board and administration have this in mind when proposing changing some of our attendance zones and

feeder patterns - and families have also had it in mind when pointing out that part of the original logic behind magnet schools for little kids was that it would increase economic mixing of students. But there is also research out there that says girls perform better academically when they are in single gender schools and Black or African-American students perform better academically when in culturally centered schools and with teachers who are of that same identity.

### **Take a Page from the City's Comp Plan Process and Present Different Scenarios to Find Aspects of Change that the Public Most Supports**

The district should proceed with an approach to public engagement similar to how the City of Pittsburgh's Comprehensive Plan obtained public participation last year. A number of scenarios were presented with the understanding that the planners would ultimately try to combine together as many aspects that the public views favorably from each of the different scenarios rather than go with one of the scenarios as written. What if the next approach were to listen to what school families like and are frustrated about with their current schools and then to facilitate school and community families and stakeholders to react to and rate different scenarios: with the understanding that some scenarios will maximize economies of scale in devoting staff and resources, some will reduce segregation in terms of economic status and race/ethnicity, and some will maximize stability in where kids are currently attending school or keep kids closer to their home address.

Personally I generally support changes, even if they are not what I expected, if they will make our schools more economically diverse because that does in some ways build in better results for lower-income students and those people groups who are historically disadvantaged. I also think we should be sensitive to and support the concerns of heavier-burdened people groups, some members of whom are asking for as much stability as possible, such as refugees, people of color and Black or African-Americans.

Finally, I respectfully ask that in all veins of thought the board and district not dismiss the people who testify against their plans and proposals as a loud minority. There are a lot of people who can't even find time and energy in their day to consider these proposals, let alone testify. You'd be surprised at the number of people who don't know what's going on beyond maybe is their school about to close or not. All deserve to be asked what they like and are concerned about, and I urge you to increase outreach directly into each school or go where people already gather to get input about what they need to help their kids succeed and in some cases stick with school.

## **Amber Quick**

### **Parent**

**February 23, 2026**

To Director Taliaferro, and the other Members of the Pittsburgh Board of Public Education,

My name is Amber Quick and I am both a proud parent of a current Pittsburgh Montessori student and a deeply invested Pittsburgh resident. I'm writing today in response to the discussions at this month's school board meeting, and to express my strong support for Montessori education within Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Montessori education is not simply another magnet option. It is a fundamentally different model of teaching and learning, one that has been implemented around the world for more than a century with a proven record of success. Unlike magnet programs that focus on a single discipline, Montessori is a whole-child, developmentally grounded approach. It nurtures independence, curiosity, academic rigor, and social-emotional growth in a way that traditional models often struggle to do. Many children, including my own, thrive in Montessori environments because they are encouraged to learn at their own pace, engage deeply with materials, and develop intrinsic motivation. These skills carry them far beyond the classroom.

Given this track record, PPS should not be looking to restrict or diminish Montessori access. We should be exploring ways to expand it.

The potential elimination of the Pittsburgh Montessori program would be a significant step backward for the district. It would also have real financial consequences. Families who believe in Montessori, and who see their children flourishing in this model, will inevitably look to charter schools for alternatives if PPS removes this option. Every family lost to a charter school means public dollars leaving the district, further eroding resources for all PPS students. This is a pattern we see

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play out time and time again, and dismantling a highly successful PPS program would only accelerate that trend.

In support of Montessori education, we have strong public school examples to look toward. Cincinnati Public Schools, for instance, has successfully invested in Montessori education across multiple schools, making this proven model accessible to students from a wide range of backgrounds. They recognize that Montessori supports both academic excellence and whole-child development. Their commitment has resulted in robust enrollment, strong student outcomes, and high family satisfaction. PPS can do the same: to lead, to innovate, and to offer more families a model that has shown year after year that children can excel when given an environment designed to meet their developmental needs.

We also have tremendous professional talent within our own school community that deserves to be uplifted. Our own Mrs. Mattie is being featured in a professional Montessori magazine for her outstanding contributions to the field. This is an extraordinary achievement and a point of pride for our school community. Educators who are recognized on a national stage bring prestige and credibility to PPS. Successes like these should be celebrated and embraced—not threatened with elimination.

The district’s own website states that as a board you are “committed to providing the best education possible for every student by providing outstanding teachers, programs and services that enable every student to achieve their maximum potential.” An option for a Montessori education is one of those proven tools to reaching this goal. Expanding access, rather than limiting it, would demonstrate our shared commitment to giving all Pittsburgh students the chance to discover their strengths in an educational model that has been proven to support academic achievement, independence, creativity, and community-mindedness. This program provides a unique, proven pathway for student success, one that should be preserved, strengthened, and extended to more neighborhoods.

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I respectfully urge the board to support Pittsburgh Montessori, honor the work of its exceptional educators, and ensure that future PPS students have access to this proven educational model. Protecting and expanding Montessori within PPS is not only in the best interest of current families. It is essential to keep families in the district and ensure the long-term health of our public schools.

Thank you for your time, your service, and your ongoing commitment to our children and community. I hope you will stand with the many families who have seen firsthand the extraordinary benefits of Montessori education and who believe deeply in making this opportunity available to more children across Pittsburgh.

Sincerely,

Amber Quick

Pittsburgh Resident and PPS Parent

## Jon Farinelli

### Community Member, Teacher

Dear Members of the Board,

I am writing as a constituent in Stanton Heights, a teacher at Pittsburgh Montessori, and a parent of two children attending the school. I respectfully ask that you reconsider any support for proposals that would eliminate the district's Montessori program, as discussed at the February 17 Future Ready Plan Discussion. More broadly, I urge the board to reconsider closing any district school that has demonstrated strong success for students.

Our district has several standout programs—Fulton, Dilworth, Allegheny, and Montessori among them—that perform well above district averages across demographic groups and remain highly popular with families. Pittsburgh Montessori, for example, is recognized in analyses of the Future Ready PA Index data as one of the top-performing elementary schools in Pittsburgh Public Schools, with PSSA proficiency rates in reading and math well above district averages.

I fully recognize the financial challenges, the urgent need to close the achievement gap, and the importance of equitable resource access. I support the board's commitment and hard work towards finding solutions to these critical issues. Rather than closing successful models, however, I believe the board should explore how the district can learn from them—perhaps even expanding whole programs. Schools are more than buildings and metrics; they are communities, cultures, and years of institutional knowledge. Let's leverage that wisdom to strengthen the district, not discard it.

As a teacher as well as a parent at Pittsburgh Montessori, I can personally attest that specialized, successful programs with diverse student bodies are what drew me to work in PPS and raise my family in the city. A few things that make Pittsburgh Montessori unique and effective include:

- **Additional, specialized training for teachers** Beyond state credentials, all classroom teachers complete extensive Montessori training—typically 600+ hours for early childhood/kindergarten and 800+ hours for elementary. This provides deep expertise in child development, social-emotional learning, and hands-on methods developed over the course of a century. It fosters a shared

philosophy, strong differentiation tools, and genuine teacher passion—despite no ACT 48, Level II, or district PD credit for the investment.

- **Mixed-age classrooms** Students learn in multi-grade settings (e.g., PreK3–Kindergarten, grades 1–3, grades 4–5), allowing teachers to build multi-year relationships with the same students and families. By second and third grade, I already know each of my students’ academic, social, and emotional strengths and needs—and I’ve built trusting relationships with their families. This continuity lets us skip re-introductions and immediately focus on deeper learning, support, and growth. As a parent, I see how this helps my own children: they transition easily each year and are genuinely eager to return to a teacher and classmates they already know well.
- **Specialized, hands-on learning materials** Montessori uses specially designed materials that are accessible and intentionally displayed to support independent practice, concept revisiting, and visible progression to advanced work. Acquiring these materials has taken years of grants, PTA support, district funds, family donations, and teacher contributions—creating inspiring environments where kids engage in hands-on learning in flexible seating arrangements.

I could go on about why Montessori is an exemplary model and Pittsburgh Montessori a wonderful place to teach and learn. It is one thing to tell you, though, and a more powerful thing to see it yourself. So, if you haven’t, please visit. See our school. Picture what it feels like to be a child walking through the doors. Do the same at other successful schools that are slated to be closed. See what makes these schools popular among families and what it is about them that retains and attracts families to our district, and what will be lost if we eliminate these programs.

I would welcome the chance to discuss this further or share more from our community. Thank you for your service and for considering these perspectives.

**Sincerely,**

Jon Farinelli

Stanton Heights Resident

Pittsburgh Montessori Lower Elementary (Grades 1-3) Teacher

PPS Montessori Parent

## **Alexandra Schaefers**

### **Parent**

**February 19, 2026**

Dear District Leaders and Board Directors,

I am writing to express my strong support for Montessori education within our public school district.

I recognize that the district is navigating difficult decisions, particularly as some buildings are under-enrolled or not meeting expectations. However, eliminating a stable, high-demand, and effectively functioning program on the basis that it would otherwise be the “only remaining magnet” reflects a fairness strategy rooted more in optics and “balance” than in sound educational policy.

There appears to be a growing disconnect between what is identified as “fair” at a systems level and what educators across buildings see working effectively for students. Those in classrooms daily evaluate programs based on student engagement, discipline outcomes, academic growth, and family satisfaction. When a model is demonstrating positive results in these areas, removing it to maintain structural symmetry does not advance equity — it diminishes a proven option for students.

I strongly encourage the Board to formally gather staff input before making a final decision. Building-level perspectives matter. Principals and teachers across the district should be provided with clear, concrete information about what blending district curriculum with Montessori materials actually looks like — the philosophy in action, the expectations for student accountability, and the structure supporting discipline and academic output. Many

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misconceptions persist. In reality, collaboration already occurs among administrators, principals, special education staff, and teachers and a genuine interest in expanding Montessori might already exist. I encourage you to ask — and to listen. Survey principals and teachers regarding whether they believe Montessori practices could positively impact their own school communities. If there is genuine interest, the conversation should not center on elimination, but on thoughtful expansion, replication of effective practices, and professional development opportunities.

The Montessori method complements district curricula such as Imagine Learning Math and Open Court ELA by providing concrete introductions, hands-on experiences, and differentiated practice that support students at every developmental stage. It also is a built in method for gifted students to independently advance in content. Children who begin Montessori as 3- or 4-year-olds in PreK are well-prepared for Kindergarten expectations, arriving with strong number sense, literacy foundations, and self-regulation skills. Even one year in a multiage “Children’s House” PreK-K group can significantly boost Kindergarten achievement. Many Montessori Kindergarten students, for example, find the Imagine Learning curriculum too easy regardless of race, home language, or socioeconomic background. These early experiences provide a head start that could be replicated or adapted across the district to strengthen outcomes for all students.

Rather than viewing Montessori as an exception to be removed, the district could consider investing in it as a point of pride. Public Montessori programs are relatively rare, and having one within our district is an asset. Encouraging more educators to pursue (or expanding so that those that are already willing, but can’t invest unless opportunities are opened) Montessori credentials, supporting cross-building collaboration, and studying the model’s practices could strengthen the district as a whole.

Equity does not require uniformity. It requires thoughtful evaluation based on outcomes, sustainability, and student impact. If certain magnet programs are struggling and neighborhood

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school enrollment is declining, those issues warrant intervention. However, eliminating successful models does not resolve those challenges. It simply removes a functioning example of what is possible elsewhere within the district.

I also ask the Board to consider the investments already made. The district has committed significant funding to Montessori materials and classroom infrastructure. Additionally, teachers themselves have invested thousands of personal dollars and countless hours into specialized Montessori training. If the program were dissolved, those institutional and personal investments would be lost.

I encourage Montessori staff and those among Dr. Walters' Leadership Team that work closely with the Montessori staff and have taken the time to observe classrooms to feel empowered to speak honestly about the future of Montessori education in our district. Thoughtful advocacy is not self-protection; it is stewardship of a model that required substantial commitment from both educators and the district and that has demonstrable outcomes of excellence.

Thank you for your service and for your careful consideration of this perspective.

Respectfully,

Alexandra Schaefers