PPS board agrees to decide on school closures by end of school year 'one way or the other'

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Pittsburgh Public Schools board members have agreed to come to a decision on school closures before the end of the school year.

The announcement came by way of a show of hands at the school board meeting Tuesday night, after school board president Gene Walker asked his fellow board members if they would commit to making a decision before school ends for the summer.

“I think it's clear tonight that this board wants to come to some conclusion one way or the other before the end of the school year, so that [superintendent] Dr. Walters either knows he has 15 months to get it done, or we need to start over,” Walker said.

The district first began deliberating school closures just over two years ago, although administrators’ proposals have failed to garner support from a majority of the board.

During the discussion Tuesday night, the board landed on several topics it believes warrant additional information from district administrators:

- The future uses of closed school buildings
- a comparative analysis of the district’s finances
- staffing estimates and capacity
- communication with the greater PPS community during the implementation of the plan
- and an explanation of the challenges and risks administrators expect to address while implementing the plan.

Board members came to this consensus through a series of straw polls led by Ray Hart, who facilitated the meeting. Hart serves as the executive director of the Council of Great

City Schools, a national coalition of urban school districts that works with both school administrators and board members.

PPS approved a two-year, $100,000 contract with the organization in 2024 for coaching services intended to make the board more efficient and effective.

Hart encouraged board members to agree on what additional information they would need from administrators to decide on the district's Future-Ready Plan, rather than attempting to change the plan.

"Asking for clarity [about the plan] is fine," said Hart, who led the meeting virtually. "Asking additional follow-up questions to the questions … I think at some point you want to bring this process to a close and just recognize this is the information we have to make a decision on an individual basis."

Last year, the organization helped the board develop a series of policies that promised to improve communication and data-sharing between PPS administrators and the board, streamline procedures, and strengthen the superintendent evaluation process.

Some parents, however, raised concerns that these measures would cede decision-making power to district administrators.

In refuting those claims last year, Walker said that the board's work with the Council of Great City Schools has better defined board members' responsibilities, as well as the tasks that should be left to the superintendent.

Hart also facilitated the board's day-long retreat at the National Aviary earlier this month.

"And his job is to help remind us to stay in our lanes, more often than not," Walker told WESA on Tuesday.

"If Dr. Walters and his team are going to implement a plan, then it has to be one that he supports and can get behind," Walker said. "If it's our plan — if we are making adjustments at that granular level — then we take the responsibility of success off of the superintendent and put it on us. And none of us should be doing that."

But limiting what information board members can request or interrogate will make it more challenging for them to make an informed decision about the plan, said District 2 director Devon Taliaferro.

"By all means, I want to trust people to do the jobs that they get paid to do," Taliaferro said. "But I think that not informing the board in a proper way creates a problem for me as someone who has to make decisions."

The most recent iteration of the district's proposal outlines the permanent closure of nine aging school buildings: Manchester K-8, Schiller 6-8, Friendship PreK-5 (Montessori), Fulton PreK-5, Miller African-Centered Academy, Woolslair PreK-5, the Student Achievement Center, Spring Hill K-5 and part of Morrow K-8.

The plan, in its current form, also dissolves existing schools like UPrep 6-12 and South Hills 6-8, shuffles thousands of students between buildings and phases out nearly all elementary-level magnet programs.

PPS administrators say those changes are necessary to ensure students at all schools have equitable access to arts and foreign language courses, a supportive middle school environment and more English language development support.

The proposal includes increasing the number of schools with dedicated spaces for English learners from 11 to 17 and spending $29 million to renovate and reopen Northview Heights K-5 on the North Side, where a growing immigrant student population resides.