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Education

Here's where Pittsburgh Public Schools goes after closure, realignment decision

By **Kellen Stepler**

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Public school closures in Pittsburgh are a microcosm of the financial, enrollment and infrastructure challenges facing urban districts nationwide.

"Pittsburgh is consistent with districts around the country in terms of changes with enrollment and investigating the district budget as revenues have changed," said Ray Hart, executive director of Council of the Great City Schools, a national coalition of urban schools.

Citing significant enrollment drops at Pittsburgh Public Schools in recent decades, Hart said adjustments are inevitable: "There's no business in the country that could lose (a large percentage) of their clientele, so to speak, and not make adjustments with staffing and their footprint."

Amid much public pushback, the Pittsburgh Public Schools board Wednesday voted 6-2, with one abstention, to close nine school buildings and shift many others. Superintendent Wayne Walters believes the plan — called the Future-Ready Facilities Plan — will improve operational efficiency, and expand access to academic programming and student supports.

Opponents of the plan said it lacks clarity and transparency, and that changes would be disruptive to students' educations.

"No one ever comes out completely satisfied," said Board President Gene Walker, who voted in favor of the plan. "I believe that we have the shared vision of what we want from our school district. We have a plan now, so I hope the energy they showed in opposition up to this point now turns into energy that helps us to be successful down the road."

Walker and board members Dwayne Barker, Tawana Cook Purnell, Eva Diodati, Yael Silk and Tracey Reed voted in favor of the closures. Devon Taliaferro and Emma Yourd were

opposed. Erikka Grayson abstained because of a perceived conflict of interest with her professional job at the Boys and Girls Club in Lawrenceville.

The Student Achievement Center, Friendship PreK-5 (Montessori), Schiller 6-8, Manchester PreK-8, Fulton PreK-5, Miller PreK-5 and Woolslair PreK-5 will close in June 2027.

Spring Hill PreK-5 and Morrow will close at the end of the 2028-29 school year after renovations to Northview PreK-5 are complete.

Additionally, Arsenal PreK-5, Allegheny 6-8, King PreK-8, Linden PreK-5, Milliones 6-12, South Brook 6-8 and South Hills 6-8 schools will dissolve. The buildings, though, will remain in operation, hosting other schools. For example, the Montessori program in Friendship will move to the Linden building in Point Breeze.

Gifted and credit recovery programs will be shifted to neighborhood schools.

Even opponents of the plan said Pittsburgh has to face its challenges head-on.

“We all agree that children in Pittsburgh deserve a better public education than what they are currently being provided in many of our schools, and that we disagree on the path to get there,” said Yourd, one of the board members who voted against the plan.

‘Can’t deny where we are’

A New York Times analysis in May found that, nationwide, falling birth rates are prompting urban school districts to consider school closures. The analysis also claims families moving to the suburbs, private and charter school competition, building underutilization, budget deficits and below-average academic programming contribute to the trend.

The School District of Philadelphia this month voted to close 17 schools. The Milwaukee Public Schools is considering closing 25 schools, and the St. Louis Public Schools could close 37 of its schools.

The average age of Pittsburgh school buildings is 90 years old, said Walters, the superintendent.

In the 2001-02 school year, PPS enrolled just more than 37,400 students. For 2025-26, the enrollment was just under 18,000.

District officials estimate the plan could avoid more than $100 million in future facility costs while allowing for more than $103 million in building investments over the next seven years.

Reed, a school board member, believes Baltimore City Public Schools could be an example for Pittsburgh Public in implementing a realignment plan. She referenced Sonja Santelises, who was Baltimore's CEO of schools for a decade.

"Their trajectory is steadily moving upward," Reed said. "(Santelises) came in, she closed some schools, she reorganized some things, and that's the model I think about when I think about this plan. We have to get some things in order before we can start to make the kinds of changes that our kids fundamentally deserve. They should not be going to schools where they're not getting what they need."

Centering students who have the most challenges will ultimately create a better system, Reed said.

"That's what happened in Baltimore, and that's what we need to be seriously focused on," she said.

Lynda Wrenn was a school board member from 2015 to 2019. She said that although the decision to close schools is difficult, it's "past due." She said the district needed to take steps to align financially and in a way that will provide more equity and resources to students.

"I totally get it — no one wants this, but you can't deny where we are," Wrenn said. "It has to happen. And by pushing it down the road, they're eroding public confidence."

Opposition mounted

Board members indicated that closing schools was something none wanted to do.

The vast majority of the 91 people registered to speak at a public hearing Tuesday urged the board to reject the plan.

"What we've heard is not a real plan, more like a concept of a plan. It does not have enough detail, transparency or community support to justify decisions that would permanently change our schools and neighborhoods," Elizabeth Cummins, a district parent, said at the public hearing. "It's also not equitable. Once again, the biggest impact falls on students, families and communities that have already managed years of instability and lack of investment."

Advocates with Black Women for a Better Education and 412 Justice, along with some parents and community members, wrote a letter to the school board last week asking it to vote against the plan. They wrote that there are critical gaps in information and staffing would hinder a successful transition.

Allyce Pinchback, founder of BW4BE, said there are legitimate concerns about the district's ability to execute the plan well and the actual academic return on investment.

"At baseline, we all get behind the fact it's not the right plan right now," Pinchback said. "It's not fleshed out enough to move forward with confidence. What happens for the trajectory of education in the city remains to be seen."

Others pointed to more specific concerns: feeder patterns on the North Side would make transportation to school difficult and walkability non-existent, said Manchester parent Jala Rucker. Woolslair students pointed to strong STEAM programming at the school. At Fulton in Highland Park, teachers have established a community to support students with special needs.

In her remarks Wednesday, school board member Taliaferro expressed disappointment with what she felt was a disregard of community members' opinions. She acknowledged the district faces financial, infrastructure and enrollment challenges that required action.

Taliaferro said the community deserves authentic representation, "to be able to make sure that we are moving in the right direction, that we are making the right decisions for children."

Angel Gober, executive director of 412 Justice, said Wednesday's board meeting was like rubbing salt in the wound.

"It's disappointing this administration and school board is not interested in community partnership," she said. "It's a hard pill to swallow. We were always clear the plan needed an edit: We needed information around transportation, class sizes, what's going to happen to staff, and will support and services follow students?

"Our most vulnerable Pittsburgh students deserve the best plan possible. This is not the best plan possible — this is a lazy plan."

Make good on its promise?

District officials promise better distribution of resources and support — such as foreign language, STEAM and sports extracurriculars — across schools through the plan.

School board member Diodati said some Pittsburgh Public schools do not have extracurriculars or academic leadership that others do.

"It's easy for me to say no, and it's easy for me to push this responsibility to someone else," Diodati said. "It is wrong for me to allow a large portion of students to suffer to protect the good of just a few."

But the impact of prior Pittsburgh school closures linger. PPS has closed 42 buildings in the past two decades.

“You can’t promise long-term. We don’t know what the future brings,” said Linda Hippert, an education professor at Point Park University. “I think what the superintendent has to do is monitor and adjust. Teachers do it every day in the classroom. Pay attention to what works and what isn’t, and continue to make things that are going well better.”

There also has been uncertainty with the plan. The board in November 2025 rejected the plan in a 6-3 vote but brought it up for reconsideration in January.

“I’ve had moments when I questioned if I was being neglectful by leaving my children in Miller, knowing the district has largely turned its back on Miller,” testified Naomi Chambers, a parent of children at Miller, a school in the Hill District. “Please give us more time so that, as a community, we can help come up with solutions that work for all of us.”

BW4BE’s Pinchback said the district should have taken more time to collaborate with city and county officials, and university experts, to strengthen a plan. BW4BE also believes the district should share specifics about how underrepresented students will benefit from proposed expanded offerings and grade reconfigurations. The board should look outside of the central office to hire an administrator to implement the plan and incorporate meaningful community feedback, Pinchback said.

Pinchback said it will be interesting to see how the board responds throughout plan implementation and feedback on Walters’ contract, which expires next year.

“Folks will continue to turn out,” Pinchback said. “People will be supportive, but it’ll be, ‘Hey, we really have our eyes on you.’ ”

Walters has spent his entire career at the Pittsburgh Public Schools since graduating from Carnegie Mellon University in 1990, starting as a teacher and rising to principal and administrator. He was named superintendent in 2022.

James Fogarty is executive director of A+ Schools, an educational advocacy nonprofit focused on Pittsburgh’s schools. Fogarty believes investment in neighborhood schools can build community and see districtwide benefits.

He points to streamlined, grades 6-8 middle schools as providing more stability for those students. Success already has been seen at neighborhood schools, he said: Concentrated, steady leadership and conflict resolution practices have drastically decreased fighting incidents at Arlington PreK-8.

“People are worried about the promises made in prior school closures that were not kept. We’re mindful of any promises made,” Fogarty said. “We have to figure out with PPS, how do we, as a community, step up and support the problem solving?

“This is a city with world-class engineers, world-class financial people, world-class educators,” Fogarty said. “There is nothing that is impossible with PPS that cannot be solved with the people who live and work in Pittsburgh.”

Accountability sought

Walters said he will share quarterly updates on the plan’s implementation to the school board. For the community, advocacy now shifts to accountability of administration, said Gober, the educational advocate.

But it’s difficult to stay optimistic, she said.

“Families are not confident in this administration with what they’re doing with education,” she said. “They would have to work extra hard to build trust and relationships. They had two years to do that, and they refused to do that.”

She predicts a “mass exodus” of families leaving the district.

“Ever since they started the process, enrollment has gone down,” Gober said. “People did not have information or confidence for administration about school merging, closing or consolidating.”

Walters told reporters this week that communication with families is integral as the plan moves forward.

“Change is hard,” he said, “and this was not easy, but it’s something that we have to do, and it’s necessary now. So know the work is on implementation and being very thoughtful about it, being very communicative about it, and really being centered on our students and making sure their experience with this transition is one that is healthy and works for them.”

Determining the future use of buildings is also a process, Walters said. More than three dozen buildings, for example, do not have air conditioning.

“Things are not getting cheaper, and we have to consolidate when we have about 15 of our schools currently with about 200 students,” he said, an enrollment figure well under capacity. “That’s a challenge to educate students and really provide the opportunities and the experiences that they deserve.

“This plan, although it’s challenging and it’s one that will be met with some grief and resentment, our work and our focus has always been about creating equity and opportunities and experiences for all of our students in this district.”