

Druid Hills Cluster

DeKalb County School District Community Advisory Team (CAT)

Engagement Series #1

Executive Summary Report

Tuesday, September 8, 2026 | 6:01 PM – 7:40 PM

Meeting Overview

This first Community Advisory Team series is focused on listening, learning, and gathering feedback. At this stage, there are no student assignment concepts, attendance boundary proposals, or draft options for the community to review. Those concepts will be developed later and are expected to be introduced during our next CAT series later this month.

The Community Advisory Team does not make final decisions regarding attendance areas. The goal is to hear as many voices, experiences, ideas, concerns, and priorities as possible. This is an important opportunity for community members to share what matters most before potential concepts are developed. The facilitators' role is to facilitate the conversation and help ensure everyone's perspectives are heard, with discussion focused on participants' own views and experiences. The feedback collected during this phase will help ensure that the individuals responsible for developing future options have a clear understanding of community perspectives and considerations.

This was the first of three CAT engagement sessions tied to DeKalb County School District's (DCSD) student assignment/redistricting planning process for the Druid Hills cluster. Demetrice Jennings-Ingram opened the meeting, and Board Member Whitney McGinnis was in attendance. Una Ali of United Way of Greater Atlanta facilitated, with two members of KW Green Consulting serving as the scribe/documentation team. The meeting was held at Druid Hills High School.

The meeting's purpose was framed as “level-setting,” building relationships among CAT members, establishing working norms and guiding principles, and surfacing broad priorities and concerns ahead of more focused option-review sessions later this month and in October (described as a “funnel” narrowing over three meetings). The CAT's role was repeatedly framed as advisory only; final decisions rested with the Board on the Superintendent's recommendation. The session followed a format of large-group orientation, small-group discussion (10 groups) on three guiding questions, report-out and theme identification, and co-creation of guiding principles and working norms.

Participation Summary

The participants were divided into 10 small groups, intentionally mixed rather than seated by school to encourage a regional rather than single-school lens. Represented roles included parents (new and long-time), teaching staff, a former school administrator, students and recent graduates, alumni of DeKalb public schools, and a former SAP (Student Assignment Project) committee member. Several groups included participants whose children had gone through special education (IEP) programs, and parents spanning multiple grade bands from elementary through high school; Group 3, which raised athletic-facility capacity concerns, included a current DCSD student athlete offering firsthand perspective on that topic.

One scribe observation noted that DCSD staff circulated and listened throughout. At least one participant stated she had not been educated in U.S. public schools, and another had relocated from New York and noted the process felt unfamiliar compared to their prior experience with school district engagement. It was confirmed by the facilitator that groups would remain consistent across all three sessions.

Major Themes

Several themes recurred across small groups. Overcrowding and staffing pressure were prominent, with class sizes described as already at capacity and teacher transfers or reductions tied to FTE counts cited as a source of disruption; participants also pointed to the state waiver DeKalb County was operating under that permitted larger class sizes. Facility conditions were a persistent concern, including aging buildings, sewage issues near locker rooms, non-functioning air conditioning, and continued use of trailer classrooms. Program equity and continuity also surfaced repeatedly. Participants wanted consistent access to IB, magnet, IEP (special education), and other specialized programs regardless of school, wanted redistricting to preserve continuity of college-preparatory pathways, and worried that a program gap could interrupt an established track (one participant cited moving into the Fernbank district specifically because of a loss of IB programming).

Community and relational continuity emerged as a strong value, with participants emphasizing the importance of students staying together through school “cohorts,” maintaining long-term peer and teacher relationships, and preserving the smaller elementary school sizes and “cluster pride” that several groups specifically named. This was closely tied to trust and transparency in the process. Visible skepticism was rooted in a prior redistricting round that some felt produced no real change, and some participants connected that distrust to broader concerns about organizational and financial management within the district. A related structural concern was that clusters were effectively organized around a central, core attendance area (typically the high school), leaving neighborhoods on the fringe, particularly at the elementary and middle school level, in a constant state of flux and, in participants' view, lower priority in past decision-making. Growth and development pressure was another recurring theme. New high-density development (e.g., the I-285 corridor project, Lulah Hills, and the Abingdale–Covington Highway corridor) raised questions about whether enrollment projections accounted for it. Finally, participants raised the pace of the process relative to the community's ability to absorb and respond to information, transportation and logistics given that most middle schools sit on the cluster's east side, and a desire to preserve racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity through any redistricting outcome.

Key Concerns

- Distrust carried over from a previous redistricting effort. Several participants said “nothing came out of it” last time and questioned whether this round, with a different consulting firm, would be different.
- Physical building conditions, including a specific account of sewage backing up near a locker room and buckets used to catch rainwater indoors; trailer classrooms raised as both a safety and belonging concern.
- Inconsistent or duplicated IEP documentation. One participant, a former administrator, described finding two students' IEPs that were identical and was told it was “a mistake.”

- Unequal access to programs across schools within the same cluster (e.g., band offered at one elementary school but not another; some schools reportedly discouraging IB/AP enrollment).
- Timeline conflict: school choice applications are due by the end of October, but enrollment-driving decisions may not be finalized until December, potentially causing families to miss the window.
- Uncertainty about whether current enrollment/capacity data reflects new development in the area, and whether it will be updated before the next CAT meeting.
- Loss of neighborhood-school identity and potential loss of socioeconomic and racial diversity as a result of boundary changes.
- A desire that this advisory input demonstrably influence outcomes, rather than serve as a symbolic exercise, with participants specifically wanting to see promised outcomes actually delivered.
- Concern about the speed of the overall process relative to the community's capacity to engage meaningfully.
- Lack of clarity on transition-process exceptions for families, particularly students in the highest grade levels at a given school (e.g., rising seniors).
- Pre-K access rose alongside broader classroom-size and teacher-ratio concerns.
- Disruption to student experience caused by frequent turnover in school leadership and staff, separate from FTE-driven teacher transfers.
- Family retention: concern that DCSD schools need to remain competitive with neighboring districts or continue losing students and families.
- Uncertainty about the future status of magnet programs under any redistricting scenario, and how magnet access would be balanced against a student's assigned school building.
- A call for any redistricting decisions to be made ethically, with explicit consideration of the impact on students' opportunities, and for any student affected by rezoning to land in a school that is just as good or better than their current one.
- A desire for parents to better understand how the district operates and what it needs to be successful, so they can engage with the process more effectively.

Areas of Consensus

Across groups, participants agreed that students should be the central consideration in every recommendation and decision. “Students at the center” emerged as a lead guiding principle. Multiple groups independently raised stability, continuity, and minimizing disruption to relationships as priority outcomes, and there was broad agreement that decision-making should involve the community up front rather than simply announcing outcomes after the fact. Facility conditions, including aging buildings, lack of air conditioning, and trailers, drew shared concern from several unrelated groups.

There was also general agreement that equity of program access, including IB, IEP, and other specialized offerings, should be a priority across the cluster regardless of which school a student is assigned to, and that school performance should be measured by quality rather than by enrollment numbers alone. Finally, participants converged around wanting transparency and accountability, specifically visibility into how their feedback from this session would be used before the next meeting.

Diverse Perspectives

Not all views were aligned. Some participants voiced open skepticism about the process's value, while others expressed hope and treated the session as a genuine opportunity to shape outcomes. Athletic facilities and regulation field size were raised as a primary concern by one group, a priority not echoed as strongly elsewhere, which also proposed exploring use of Sequoia High School space as an alternative to redistricting. A couple of participants shared perspectives shaped by not having grown up in the U.S. public school system, offering an outsider's view of the process.

Views also differed on whether the CAT's scope should stay narrowly focused on the Druid Hills cluster or address broader district-wide considerations, such as the use of Sequoia High School. The facilitator clarified that the current focus was strictly the cluster rather than district-wide policy or final recommendations, though broader input was welcome. Newer residents and parents, including one from out of state and one currently living in Clarkston with experience of incoming refugee students, offered contrasting frames of reference compared to long-tenured DeKalb staff and multi-generation families. Experiences with specific schools varied widely within the same cluster. Some participants described strong, consistent experiences with teachers at Druid Hills, while others cited disruption from overcrowding and staff turnover. Priorities also varied on what “outcomes that matter” meant in practice: some participants emphasized convenience and proximity, while others weighed magnet-program access against a specific school building, reflecting differing views on how to balance those tradeoffs.

Questions Raised

- Whether the same small group would stay together for all three CAT sessions (*confirmed: yes*).
- Whether participants would receive a copy of the flipchart notes/materials, and whether formal minutes would be distributed (*participants were told they could photograph materials; no commitment was made on formal minute distribution*).
- Whether enrollment and capacity counts would be updated before the next meeting to reflect current overcrowding/underutilization (official state counts are finalized in early October and will be published on the district website).
- Whether the CAT's task was limited to the Druid Hills cluster or extended to district-wide student assignment considerations.
- How the district would demonstrate that CAT feedback was actually being used (*accountability*).
- Whether recent high-density development projects had been factored into current enrollment projections.
- What was prompting the pace of the process, and whether additional context or communication could be shared ahead of future meetings.
- Whether the meeting agenda and location could be shared further in advance of future sessions (*participants noted they had not received this information ahead of the September 8 meeting and asked for it before Session #2*).

Additional Observations

- A participant referenced a state house bill related to school zoning as a factor worth watching.
- Several supplemental materials (flipchart photos, small-group notes) were captured as images alongside the written scribe notes and were available for reference but not transcribed verbatim.
- Facilitators acknowledged the session ran longer than the allotted 15 minutes for small-group report-outs, noting the extended discussion was valuable and worth the added time.
- Closing logistics: name badges were collected, and participants were directed to the district website for further engagement, including additional focus groups and public comment registration.
- A representative confirmed that any enrollment numbers referenced would be publicly available once official state counts were finalized in early October.