

Dunwoody Cluster

DeKalb County School District Community Advisory Team (CAT)

Engagement Series #1

Executive Summary Report

Thursday, September 10, 2026 | 6:00 PM – 7:42 PM

Meeting Overview

This first Community Advisory Team meeting for the Dunwoody Cluster was focused on listening, learning, and gathering feedback. As at other cluster meetings, no attendance boundary proposals or draft scenarios were presented for review; participants were told the district would use tonight's input to shape the second CAT meeting on October 1, which will in turn feed a third meeting on October 29.

This was the first of three CAT engagement meetings tied to DeKalb County School District's (DCSD) student assignment/redistricting planning process for the Dunwoody Cluster held at Dunwoody High School. The district's Chief Operations Officer delivered the official welcome and read a prepared script; no participant questions were raised during that portion. The meeting was facilitated by United Way, with KW Green Consulting serving as the scribe and documentation team responsible for accurately capturing and analyzing community input. DeKalb Board of Education member Andrew B. Ziffer was in attendance and spoke briefly near the close of the meeting.

Groups of 10 were asked to describe the perspectives and experiences shaping their views, identify concerns and opportunities decision-makers should understand, and define the outcomes that matter most to students and families; most tables worked through all three prompts together rather than one at a time. Each small group was asked to identify a recorder and a reporter, and note cards were available for additional comments. A reporter/photographer from Decaturish newspaper with the DCSD's director of communications, and an interpreter supported Spanish-speaking participants. The session closed with a review of guiding principles, a discussion of what would make the process feel meaningful, and reflection ahead of the October 1 session. The meeting concluded at 7:42 p.m.

Participation Summary

Approximately 53 participants took part, representing elementary, middle, and high schools across the Dunwoody cluster, including Chestnut, Kingsley, Peachtree, Vanderlyn, Austin, Hightower, and Dunwoody Elementary/High School. Attendees included parents, teachers, PTO and principal advisory council members, alumni, and one student representative, seated in small groups (four to eight participants each). Participants included parents, including former PTO leaders and current members, teachers, alumni, and community members.

Major Themes

Participants consistently linked several themes together rather than treating them as separate issues. Educational quality and student outcomes were named as the measure the process should ultimately be judged by, with several participants asking why academic performance was not more prominent among the district's stated criteria. Community and neighborhood continuity was described in terms of schools as anchors for relationships, parent involvement, walkability, and student belonging. It was also noted that the Dunwoody cluster was an interconnected community.

Overcrowding and facility conditions were raised as an elementary-through-high-school problem, not an elementary-only issue. These conditions included large class sizes, extensive reliance on portable classrooms, security around those portables, mold and humidity, and aging buildings. One participant recalled that portables at Peachtree Elementary were promised replacement before COVID. Seven years ago, and are still in use well past their intended lifespan. Data and long-term planning surfaced as a recurring frustration, with participants requesting validated, forward-looking enrollment projections that account for post-COVID patterns, younger grade cohorts, and new housing development. Financial information and a concrete reuse plan for any school property that stops being used as a school were requested.

Equity was repeatedly distinguished from identical treatment. Participants asked the district to account for each school's student needs, socioeconomic makeup, fundraising capacity, staffing, and access to gifted, special education, English-learner, advanced, and enrichment programs. Several linked a lack of elementary and middle school gifted programming in Region 2 directly to families leaving for Kittredge Elementary, Chamblee Middle and High School, or private schools.

Transparency and trust were a major undercurrent, with participants wanting a clear rationale and tradeoffs explained before any scenarios are presented. Those concerns were shaped by skepticism from prior student-assignment efforts. Programming and family retention were tied together, with strong or well-placed programs (gifted services, dual-language immersion, IB, and English-learner supports) seen as key to keeping families in neighborhood schools rather than losing them to private or school-choice options. Finally, participants valued the diversity within Dunwoody schools and wanted it explicitly preserved, while also observing that the room itself did not fully reflect the cluster's diversity.

Key Concerns

- Overcrowding at the middle and high school level, and long-delayed replacement of aging, deteriorating portable classrooms (including a specific account of Peachtree Elementary portables still in use seven years after a promised pre-COVID replacement).
- Lack of elementary and middle school gifted programming in Region 2, which participants linked directly to families leaving for Kittredge, Chamblee, or private schools.
- Doubts about the accuracy and currency of enrollment and performance data, and a request for forward-looking projections that account for housing development and post-COVID patterns.
- No concrete plan for what happens to a school building or property if it is closed or no longer used.
- Disruption to established community and peer relationships if students are redistricted away from their current schools.

- Budget priorities and disparities in PTA/community fundraising ("soft funding") that affect a school's resources and perceived desirability.
- Families leaving for private schools or exercising school choice, with uncertainty about why enrollment is declining at some schools.
- Access to advanced coursework for students outside of magnet program placements.
- Travel time and early bus schedules for young children under any new boundary plan.
- Skepticism that community input will meaningfully change outcomes, rooted in past experience of the process not producing visible change.
- Presenting and then withdrawing specific scenarios would be disruptive and unsettling to families.

Areas of Consensus

When the facilitator reviewed the suggested guiding principles, participants generally accepted them with little discussion, seeming eager to move on to defining what success would look like. This was an indication of rough agreement with the pre-established norms rather than significant debate over how the group should operate.

On defining success, participants converged on wanting to know their input genuinely mattered and shaped real outcomes, a clearly articulated five-year vision for the cluster framed as forward planning and addition rather than loss, and a "meaningfully defined why" paired with a fiscally responsible "what." Multiple participants said success meant being equipped with enough data to make an informed decision rather than relying on anecdote and wanted a district representative present at future sessions to hear directly from the room. There was also broad agreement that specialized programming (gifted, special education, magnet, IB, and language immersion) should be equitably available across the cluster so no student must leave their community to access it, and that students and neighborhoods should be kept together through any transition.

Diverse Perspectives

Participants differed on how to define "community" for planning purposes, some treated the city of Dunwoody as the relevant community, while others argued that community was smaller than the whole cluster. Views also diverged on past decisions to consolidate smaller neighborhood schools, including differing recollections of the choice to relocate Austin Elementary into a larger building.

Emphasis also varied on how decisions should be justified. Some participants stressed hard data over personal stories, saying they did not want to base opinions on anecdotes and wanted to see the numbers directly. Others pushed back on reducing students to test scores, framing their children as "the whole person" rather than a data point. A related tension surfaced around trust in the facilitation model itself. One participant suggested it would help to have a district staff member seated directly at each table going forward. The facilitator explained the district had intentionally used a neutral third-party facilitator and transcription team to keep the conversation unbiased. Some participants voiced long-standing skepticism, including one who said they had heard the same commitments for 22 years with little visible change, while others focused more on wanting a clear, data-backed path to an informed decision than on expressing distrust outright.

Questions Raised

Process and purpose: What will the next meeting show: several scenarios or one primary option? What are participants expected to accomplish across the remaining two sessions? Can information be shared in advance so attendees can come prepared? How will tonight's input be weighed against surveys, community forums, and online focus groups? Will the flip chart and card notes be published?

- Data and planning: Is the district using current data or forward-looking projections? What specifically are the overcrowded schools, and what are their enrollment numbers?
- Educational quality and equity: Why isn't school performance included more prominently in the stated criteria? What does each individual school need to succeed, given its specific community? Are current programs effectively meeting students' needs?
- Capacity, facilities, and funding: How will middle and high school overcrowding be addressed? What will the district do about security around portable classrooms? Where will funding for programs and facility improvements come from? If a building closes, what is the plan for its future use?
- Boundaries, programs, and school choice: What is the plan for a new cluster configuration, and how would redrawn boundaries affect Dunwoody? How would school choice be affected? Why are families leaving their neighborhood schools in the first place?

Additional Observations

- Approximately 53 participants attended, spanning elementary, middle, and high schools across the cluster; the discussion was described as active and generally constructive.
- The district's Chief Operations Officer opened the meeting with prepared remarks; no participant questions arose during that portion.
- The facilitator circulated among tables throughout the small-group discussion, and an interpreter was present to support Spanish-speaking CAT members.
- The School board member and director of communications circulated among tables answering questions.
- Some participants began leaving before the facilitator finished her closing remarks.
- The two elementary schools referenced by one group as potentially facing closure were not named and remain unconfirmed.