Cross Keys Cluster

DeKalb County School District Community Advisory Team (CAT)

Engagement Series #1

Executive Summary Report

Thursday, September 10, 2026 | 6:00 PM – 7:50 PM

Meeting Overview

This first Community Advisory Team meeting for the Cross Keys Cluster was focused on listening, learning, and gathering feedback. As with the district's other cluster meetings, no student assignment concepts, attendance boundary proposals, or draft options were presented for review at this stage; those concepts are expected to be introduced during the next CAT meeting on October 1, with a third meeting to follow on October 29.

The meeting was facilitated by the United Way, with KW Green Consulting serving as the scribe and documentation team responsible for accurately capturing and analyzing community input. The facilitator framed the CAT's role as representing participants' community perspectives, with the goal of hearing and considering as many voices and priorities as possible. The district was described as evaluating a range of factors, including enrollment trends, facility utilization, school capacity, feeder patterns, transportation considerations, demographics, and community input. The meeting followed the agenda: welcome and orientation to the CAT's role, an overview of the student assignment project, small-group discussion organized around guiding questions, report-out and theme identification, co-creation of guiding principles, and a discussion of what would make the process feel meaningful and worthwhile. The meeting ended at 7:50 p.m.

Participation Summary

There were 20–30 participants in attendance - attributed, in part, to limited outreach methods, insufficient attention to linguistic barriers and multimodal communication, and safety concerns among community members.

Participants were organized into five small groups with a mix of roles: classroom teachers (including several with long tenure in the Cross Keys cluster), ESL/ESOL-certified and bilingual teachers, school counselors, parents (including non-native English speakers and at least one Latino parent from an immigrant family), a middle school principal, and students, including an elementary school student and a public high school student who is a Spanish speaker and ESOL-certified. Several participants were themselves products of DeKalb County schools, and multiple educators had worked in the Cross Keys cluster for many years or decades, including one teacher who has taught in the cluster since 1998 and another present since 2014. A district representative was present and responded directly to questions during the meeting.

Major Themes

Transportation and distance were raised consistently, with participants describing long bus routes and families relying on costly rideshare or taxi service to reach schools located farther from home, which also limits students' ability to participate in school activities. Program access and equity were a recurring concern. Participants pointed to inequitable access to specialized curricula, mediation programs, and programs such as an intensive English program the cluster has lost and noted that not every school can offer every program but wanted greater capacity and opportunity across the cluster.

Concerns about gerrymandered attendance lines were widespread, with participants worried that current boundaries create thin, disconnected attendance bands that could deepen segregation. Further, it was expressed that redrawn lines might fail to respect existing community relationships. There was also concern over school choice and the loss of students and teacher quality to private and charter schools, and questions about who would have access to new school construction currently underway in the cluster. Title I funding was flagged as being at risk if socioeconomic shifts occur due to redistricting, which participants tied directly to resources available for students.

Language access and communication also emerged as a major theme. Participants described receiving information that is translated but not truly understandable to non-educators or non-English-speaking families. Participants requested robocalls, audio-based and multimodal communication, and use of translators already trusted within school buildings. Maintaining existing partnerships with community organizations such as the Latin American Association were also mentioned. Several participants also raised the impact of increased immigration enforcement activity in recent months, describing fear and loss of students tied to this, as well as broader distrust rooted in a history of the district listening to community input without visible follow-through. Diversity and equity were discussed together, with participants distinguishing between diversifying schools and ensuring diversity is paired with equitable resources and teacher training so that no group of students is left more vulnerable.

Key Concerns

- Transportation costs and long bus routes, with families relying on rideshare or taxis to reach schools farther from home.
- Risk to Title I funding and associated resources if redistricting shifts a school's socioeconomic composition.
- Gerrymandered or purposefully drawn attendance lines that fragment existing communities and may worsen segregation.
- Unequal access to specialized programming (e.g., ESL/EL support, arts, aviation-type programs) across the cluster and county.
- Loss of students and teachers to private and charter schools, and difficulty retaining quality teachers in the cluster.
- Uncertainty over who will have access to new school buildings currently under construction in the cluster.
- Communication that is translated but not genuinely accessible or understandable to non-English-speaking and less literate families.
- Impact of increased immigration enforcement activity on family participation, safety, and enrollment.

- Deep distrust of the district based on a history of collecting input without visible action.
- Students historically placed in overcrowded schools or trailers potentially being excluded from new facilities once built.
- Low survey accessibility and a specific request from participants to stop relying on surveys to reach this community.

Areas of Consensus

Across groups, participants converged on several guiding principles for the process going forward: keeping students at the center of every decision, listening to understand rather than to respond, respecting all perspectives, assuming positive intent, focusing on solutions, ensuring all voices are heard, maintaining transparency, and considering impacts on all students, families, and communities. Building trusting relationships and grounding decisions in best practices were also broadly supported.

There was general agreement that ESL programming should be preserved and strengthened as the population changes, and that teachers need proper training to support diverse populations. Participants across groups agreed that programming should be equitable rather than concentrated in a few schools, and that new programming built into redesigned schools should match or exceed the quality of existing facilities, so the changes do not create a two-tiered system. Participants also agreed that outcomes should be judged as fair, just, and adaptable to changing communities. In addition, all students, teachers, and families should be treated as the district would treat its own.

Diverse Perspectives

Views differed on how to balance keeping existing communities intact versus intentionally diversifying school populations. Participants acknowledged pros and cons on both sides and noted that school choice policy interacts with either path. Some participants emphasized rebuilding a legacy of academic excellence and correcting long-standing inequity, while others focused more narrowly on the practical burdens of transportation, relocation, and program access.

Perspectives on trust also varied: some participants credited improved facilitation and communication in recent years, particularly the use of flip charts and repeating feedback back to confirm understanding. Others expressed strong skepticism grounded in a history of the district listening without acting and described a need to organize independently to demand accountability. One participant shared a personal account of feeling targeted by increased immigration enforcement (referencing ICE) and displacement pressures affecting the community, offering a perspective on the stakes of the process that were not voiced as directly in other groups. A separate comment from a participant with experience in a self-contained dual-language or similar program at another cluster's high school (Pleasantdale) cautioned against creating a program that functions as "a private school within a school," a concern not raised elsewhere in the Cross Keys discussion.

Questions Raised

- How will the district ensure new school buildings are actually available to the students and families who have historically been underserved in the cluster?
- What best practices exist for supporting a diverse school community, and whether the district can point to a clear standard or "North Star"?
- When will the school choice application process open and when will final decisions be made? (A district representative confirmed the application would be available in November, with decisions expected in January this year, compared to December in prior years.)
- How will the district improve outreach and engagement ahead of the October 1 meeting, including working through trusted community and nonprofit partners?
- How can communication be made genuinely accessible, beyond translation, to families with varying literacy levels and language backgrounds?
- Whether and how creative financing partnerships, such as with the Dresden Foundation, could support school resources without relying solely on redistricting or tax increases?

Additional Observations

- Turnout was about 20–30 participants, attributed to limited outreach, insufficient attention to linguistic barriers, and safety concerns.
- Facilitation was noted as smoother than in prior CAT meetings Tuesday, with feedback repeated back to participants confirming understanding and more effective use of flip charts for notetaking and reporting.
- District staff presence was described as lighter than at other meetings earlier this week.
- The diversity of the cluster was not seen as fully represented among those in attendance.
- Participants and scribes noted a continued lack of clarity about the overall process, what changes are being considered, and the CAT's role. They recommended this be clarified further and communicated earlier ahead of future meetings.
- Participation was active but marked by visible distrust and apprehension rooted in past experiences with the district.
- A specific request was made to stop sending surveys to this community and to rely instead on communal, in-person, and multimodal engagement.
- The Latin American Association was suggested as a potential partner organization with existing community relationships.