

Engagement Session 1: Public Comment Meeting

Chamblee Cluster SAP Public Comment Session: Key Takeaways

Executive Summary

The overwhelming message from participants was not opposition to change itself, but a call for the district to demonstrate a clear rationale, transparency, trustworthiness, and student-centered decision-making before pursuing significant boundary changes.

While a large portion of speakers represented Ashford Park Elementary and advocated strongly for campus expansion rather than redistricting, several broader themes emerged across clusters:

1. Trust and transparency in the SAP process
2. Preservation of school communities and feeder patterns
3. School quality, academic programming, and student outcomes
4. Equity beyond race and economics
5. Facility conditions, safety, and infrastructure investments
6. Desire for innovative solutions rather than traditional redistricting
7. Need for clarity regarding long-term enrollment and capacity strategy

Major Themes

1. Trust in the Process is the Dominant Issue

This was the strongest cross-cutting theme of the evening.

Community members repeatedly questioned:

- How decisions will be made
- What data and methodologies will be used
- Whether public input will genuinely influence outcomes
- Whether previous feedback has meaningfully informed decisions

Several speakers referenced last spring's process as having damaged public confidence because schools appeared to be evaluated for closure before a clear rationale had been communicated.

Representative Sentiments

- "Show us the data."
- "Show us the methodology."
- "Students aren't inventory."
- "We're being asked for feedback without understanding the framework."
- "The district should not work backwards from predetermined outcomes."

Leadership Implication

Trust may be a larger challenge than the technical boundary work itself.

Stakeholders appear willing to engage if they believe:

- Decision criteria are clear.
- Tradeoffs are transparent.
- Community feedback visibly influences recommendations.

2. Strong Preference for Community Preservation

Many speakers emphasized that schools are more than facilities.

Common references included:

- Neighborhood identity
- Walking and biking to school
- Long-standing friendships
- Parent volunteer networks
- Community support systems
- Feeder continuity

Families repeatedly framed schools as community anchors rather than enrollment units.

Key Message

Residents want the district to consider:

- Intact neighborhoods
- Existing community networks
- Established feeder patterns alongside capacity metrics.

Leadership Implication

Any recommendation that separates established neighborhoods appears likely to face significant resistance unless a compelling educational benefit is clearly demonstrated.

3. Capacity Alone Is Not Viewed as Sufficient Justification

Many participants challenged the notion that utilization rates should drive decisions independently.

Several speakers argued that:

- Academic performance matters.
- Program offerings matter.
- Community preference matters.
- Student experiences matter.

A recurring concern was that students could be moved from highly desirable schools without discussion of how educational experience would improve afterward.

Key Question Raised Repeatedly

"How does this improve opportunity for my child?"

Leadership Implication

Stakeholders are looking for a stronger connection between:

- Boundary changes
- Educational outcomes
- Student opportunities

rather than viewing the project primarily as a facilities exercise.

Ashford Park Elementary: Most Significant School-Specific Issue

Approximately half of public comments centered on Ashford Park. The shared position was remarkably consistent.

Core Request

Expand Ashford Park instead of redistributing students.

Arguments Presented

Speakers repeatedly cited:

- The school has been overcrowded for more than a decade.
- Enrollment is approximately 854 students.
- Permanent capacity is approximately 480 students.
- The district already owns the property.
- Expansion is believed feasible.
- Expansion would eliminate portable classrooms.
- Expansion would preserve the neighborhood school model.

Additional Factors Raised

Families highlighted:

- Walkability
- Bike buses
- Strong PTO engagement
- Volunteerism
- German Dual Language Immersion
- High academic performance
- Strong school culture

Several speakers described fear and uncertainty resulting from previous closure discussions, including direct impacts on students.

Leadership Note

The Ashford Park community appears highly organized, highly engaged, and largely aligned around one proposed solution: expansion.

Equity Theme Was More Complex Than Expected

While equity was discussed frequently, speakers broadened the conversation beyond traditional equity indicators.

Participants asked the district to consider:

Socioeconomic Equity

- Title I schools
- Resource disparities
- Enrollment patterns
- Access to opportunities

Language Equity

- Families who may not be able to participate in public meetings
- Interpreter access
- Multilingual engagement

Disability Equity

One speaker specifically noted that discussions of equity often focus on race and economics while overlooking:

- Students with disabilities
- Neurodivergent students

Leadership Implication

Community members are asking for a broader definition of equity than many public discussions typically employ.

Academic Programs Are Viewed as a Strategic Lever

Several speakers urged the district to focus more heavily on programs rather than primarily on attendance boundaries.

Ideas included:

- Specialized academic pathways
- Additional magnet opportunities
- STEAM programming
- Arts programs
- Expanded language immersion
- High-achiever pathways
- Choice options tied to Sequoia High School

Notable Suggestion

Multiple speakers proposed using the opening of Sequoia High School as a major opportunity to:

- Attract students voluntarily
- Relieve overcrowding naturally
- Increase educational choice

rather than relying primarily on reassignment.

Leadership Implication

There appears to be notable interest in "programmatic solutions" alongside boundary solutions.

Student Safety Emerged as an Important Secondary Theme

A notable subset of comments focused less on SAP and more on district credibility regarding safety.

Issues raised included:

- Chamblee Middle athletic field conditions
- Construction debris concerns
- Safe routes to schools
- Traffic safety
- Student physical safety
- Responses to reported harassment and threats

Underlying Message

Several speakers suggested that confidence in large-scale district initiatives is connected to confidence in the district's ability to address day-to-day operational concerns.

Engagement Process Feedback

Participants requested:

More Accessible Opportunities

- Weekend sessions
- Additional meeting times
- Broader outreach

Stronger Inclusivity

- Expanded language supports
- Better access for working families
- Better representation of underserved communities

More Transparency

- Release methodologies
- Release assumptions
- Explain decision criteria
- Clarify how input influences recommendations

Notable Tensions Leadership Should Monitor

1. High-Performing vs. Under-Resourced Schools

A recurring tension surfaced between:

- Preserving successful school communities
- Creating equitable opportunity across the district

This issue was often implied rather than explicitly stated but appeared throughout the discussion.

2. Capacity Management vs. Community Preservation

District goals:

- Capacity efficiency
- Sustainable enrollment

Community goals:

- Neighborhood continuity
- Existing school identity

This tension is likely to remain central throughout the SAP process.

3. Immediate Action vs. Long-Term Planning

Some speakers urged:

- Faster decisions
- Greater certainty

Others urged:

- Slower decisions
- More study
- More innovative alternatives

Leadership should expect continued tension between urgency and deliberate planning.

Key Takeaways for District Leadership

What stakeholders most want:

1. Transparency before recommendations
2. Evidence that public input matters
3. Student outcomes discussed alongside capacity
4. Protection of neighborhood communities where possible
5. Clear long-term planning for overcrowded schools
6. Investment in under-resourced schools
7. Innovative programmatic solutions, especially around Sequoia
8. Facility and safety concerns addressed alongside SAP

Most Organized/Unified Message of the Night

The clearest consensus from speakers was:

Ashford Park's overcrowding should be addressed through a permanent expansion of the existing campus rather than through school closure, fragmentation, or significant redistribution of students.

Most Important Strategic Signal

Beyond any individual school issue, the meeting revealed that community trust, transparency, and confidence in the district's decision-making process may ultimately be as important as the boundary recommendations themselves