

Engagement Session 1: Public Comment Meeting

Lakeside SAP Public Comment Session: Key Takeaways

Executive Summary

The overwhelming message from participants was:

1. Prioritize students, safety, and community stability over simply balancing seats.
2. Increase transparency and public trust in the process.
3. Preserve successful school communities and specialized programs.
4. Explore innovative alternatives before large-scale redistricting.
5. Improve communication and engagement practices.

Most Common Themes

1. Transparency and Trust in the Process

Most frequently raised concern. Many speakers expressed concern that previous SAP efforts lacked transparency and that community feedback was not genuinely incorporated into decision-making.

Specific concerns

- Limited notice for meetings and speaking opportunities.
- Confusing communication about public meetings.
- Difficulty understanding survey questions.
- Lack of access to enrollment and projection data.
- Concerns about proprietary planning models and software.
- Fear that decisions may already be predetermined.

Representative comments

Speakers repeatedly requested:

- Open access to underlying data.
- Clear explanations of assumptions and projections.
- Greater visibility into how feedback will be used.
- More authentic community partnership rather than consultation after decisions are drafted.

2. Preserve Existing Communities and Neighborhood Schools

Second strongest theme. Many participants emphasized that schools are more than buildings; they are community anchors.

Concerns

- Breaking apart established neighborhoods.
- Splitting friendship networks.
- Disrupting long-standing community traditions.
- Impacts on parent involvement and volunteerism.
- Loss of school identity.

Several speakers shared personal experiences from previous redistricting efforts and described negative social impacts when small groups of students were reassigned away from established peer groups.

Frequently mentioned schools

- Henderson Mill Elementary
- Hawthorne Elementary
- Lakeside cluster schools
- Pleasantdale Elementary
- Fernbank Elementary

3. Student Safety and Transportation

Consistently mentioned across multiple speakers. Participants argued that safety should be the highest priority criterion.

Issues raised

- Longer bus routes.
- Major highway crossings.
- Increased traffic congestion.
- Reduced walkability.
- Parent ability to respond during emergencies.

Many speakers requested:

- Formal traffic studies.
- Transportation impact analyses.
- Safety reviews before any boundary changes are proposed.

4. Protect Successful Programs

Many comments focused on preserving programs that families specifically chose.

Most commonly mentioned

- Dual Language Immersion (DLI)
- Coralwood special education pipeline
- Hawthorne inclusion programs
- STEM programs
- Music programs
- Theater and arts programs

Participants emphasized that successful programs create demand for schools and should be viewed as assets rather than obstacles.

5. Questioning Whether Redistricting Is the Best Solution

Several speakers challenged the assumption that student reassignment should be the primary tool.

Core argument

The issue may not be solely a boundary problem.

Instead, speakers suggested:

- Programming problems.
- Facility planning challenges.
- Long-term capacity planning issues.
- Lack of attractive options at under-enrolled schools.

Many argued that the district should first explore alternatives before moving families.

Most Innovative Ideas & Recommendations

Several speakers proposed creative solutions that went beyond traditional redistricting.

1. Create New Specialized Programs at Under-Enrolled Schools

Most innovative and most repeated recommendation.

Instead of moving students to underutilized schools:

- Add DLI programs.
- Add STEM programs.
- Add IB programs.
- Add Montessori programs.
- Add arts and performing arts programs.
- Add outdoor education programs.
- Add technology-focused programs.

Rationale

Families naturally choose schools with attractive programming. Create demand rather than force reassignment.

2. Re-purpose Existing Facilities into Specialty Schools

One parent suggested using excess capacity creatively.

Possible examples:

- Medical sciences high school.
- Aviation-focused school.
- Career pathway schools.
- Theme-based academy structures.

The recommendation was to align specialized programs with regional assets such as Emory and Atlanta-area industries.

3. Freshman Campus for Lakeside

A notable proposal was creating a dedicated freshman campus.

Benefits cited

- Reduces crowding at Lakeside.
- Preserves cluster identity.
- Creates smoother transition to high school.
- Avoids large-scale reassignment of families.

A possible location mentioned was the Heritage Drive site.

4. Reconsider Cross Keys Middle School Solutions

Several speakers returned to the issue of Cross Keys lacking a middle school.

Ideas included:

- Converting existing facilities.
- Repurposing available elementary campuses.
- Exploring alternatives before moving students into other clusters.

This emerged as one of the most discussed planning challenges.

5. Expand Community-Sourced Planning

Multiple speakers suggested a crowdsourced planning model.

Recommendation

Allow:

- Data scientists.
- Engineers.
- Educators.
- Planners.
- Parents

Several speakers noted that the community contains considerable expertise that could help identify viable alternatives.

6. Strengthen Arts Pathways

Several comments focused on arts education.

Recommendations included:

- Greater investment in elementary and middle school arts.
- Enhanced theater pathways.
- Better support for music feeder systems.
- Protecting feeder schools that sustain band, chorus, and orchestra enrollment.

Sentiment Analysis

Overall tone

- Concerned
- Protective
- Skeptical
- Solution-oriented

Notable observation

Despite strong concerns, the meeting was largely constructive. Most speakers:

- Acknowledged district efforts to restart engagement.
- Expressed willingness to collaborate.
- Offered alternatives instead of simply opposing change.

There was little support for broad redistricting as the primary strategy, but substantial support for collaborative planning and innovative solutions.

Key Messages for District Leadership

If distilled into five stakeholder priorities:

1. Show the data and assumptions.
2. Protect successful school communities and programs.
3. Prioritize student safety over capacity metrics alone.
4. Consider innovative programmatic solutions before boundary changes.
5. Demonstrate how community input directly influences decisions.