Executive Briefing for Columbus City Schools Leadership & Board of Education
Empower Your Voice: Inform. Listen. Connect.
Student, Family, and Community Engagement Update | September-November 2026

Executive Briefing

The Empower Your Voice Community Listening Series was designed to provide meaningful opportunities for students, families, staff, and community members to engage directly with district leadership, share perspectives, and help inform future district planning and Board decision-making. The initiative included Family Ambassador Convenings, Community Listening Sessions, Student Voice Lunch Conversations, Virtual Office Hours, and an online survey.

Engagement Activities

- 1 Family Ambassador Bi-Annual Convening
- 3 Community Listening Sessions
- 3 Student Voice Lunch Conversations
- 2 Virtual Office Hours
- 900+ Districtwide Online Feedback Surveys Completed
- 9 Impacted Teacher Listening Sessions

Locations included Fort Hayes, Buckeye Middle School, South High School, Mifflin High School, Mifflin Middle School, and Marion-Franklin High School.

What We Heard

Across all engagement opportunities, six themes emerged consistently:

1. Communication, Transparency, and Trust

- Stakeholders want earlier, clearer, and more frequent communication.
- Participants want to understand how their feedback influences district decisions.
- Many requested greater transparency around facilities, transportation, finances, and future planning.

2. Transportation

- Transportation remains one of the most significant concerns.
- Families and students cited concerns regarding safety, reliability, attendance impacts, and equity of access.
- Student discussions highlighted significant concerns regarding proposed COTA transportation options.

3. Facilities and School Realignment

- Stakeholders support modern facilities but want assurance that community identity, school traditions, and specialized programs are preserved.
- There is strong interest in continued engagement before major decisions regarding closures, consolidation, or boundary changes are finalized.

4. Student Belonging and School Culture

- Students consistently emphasized that positive relationships, trusted adults, and school culture directly impact their academic and personal success.
- Feelings of belonging emerged as one of the strongest predictors of student engagement.

5. Family Engagement and Partnerships

- Families expressed a desire for deeper involvement in district decision-making.
- Stakeholders encouraged expanded Family Ambassador engagement and stronger community partnerships.

6. Supporting the Whole Child

- Participants highlighted mental health, attendance, early childhood education, career pathways, student support services, and student wellness as critical priorities.

Student Voice Listening Session Highlights

Students across all sites demonstrated a strong desire to be informed, heard, and included in decisions affecting their educational experiences.

- Students expressed **concerns about the impact of budget reductions, district changes, and facility discussions on their educational experience and school community.**
- **Transportation**, particularly proposals involving COTA, emerged as a significant concern due to potential **impacts on student safety, attendance, reliability, accessibility, and daily school participation.**
- Students **strongly value their school communities** and want to preserve the traditions, academies, clubs, athletics, arts programs, and relationships that help define their schools' identities.
- A strong **sense of belonging was evident across conversations**, with students emphasizing the **importance of maintaining welcoming, respectful, and supportive school environments where they feel connected and valued**.
- Students consistently identified **trusted relationships with teachers, counselors, coaches, administrators, and other caring adults** as essential to their success, well-being, and engagement in school.

- Concerns about **losing community connections, school traditions, identity,** and the relationships that contribute to a positive school climate.
- Students requested **greater transparency, direct communication, and meaningful involvement in decisions that affect them**, while highlighting the importance of **preserving opportunities for student learning, leadership, engagement, and community support.**

Key Takeaways from Student Listening Sessions

A consistent message emerged across all audiences: stakeholders want opportunities to be informed, heard, and involved before major decisions are made. Trust is strengthened when communication is transparent, student voice is elevated, and feedback is visibly connected to district actions. The feedback gathered through Empower Your Voice provides valuable insight that can help guide future planning, communication, and engagement efforts.

Impacted Teacher Listening Sessions

Key Themes from Staff Conversations at Impacted Schools

Staff questions and feedback consistently centered around the need for additional information and clarity in several key areas:

- **Student Enrollment & Attendance Patterns**: Questions about how many students live within the school's attendance area compared with those who attend from outside the neighborhood.
- **Facility & Resource Transitions**: Interest in understanding what would happen to existing school assets, equipment, and resources if a relocation or consolidation occurs.
- **Specialized Programming**: Requests for clarification regarding the future of specialized programs and services, including early childhood and special education supports.
- **Program Continuity**: Questions about whether receiving schools have the capacity and space needed to maintain unique academic, arts, or specialty programming.
- **Staffing & Employee Impact**: Concerns regarding staffing decisions, timelines for employee notifications, and how transitions would be managed in partnership with labor organizations. Staff expressed a strong desire for timely and transparent communication about potential impacts to employees.
- **Transition Planning & Support**: Interest in understanding the district's approach to managing student, staff, and program transitions should realignment proposals be approved. Staff emphasized the importance of a well-defined implementation plan.

- **Communication & Public Information**: Feedback that community-facing materials should be clearer and easier to understand, particularly regarding reassignment plans, transition processes, and the rationale for proposed changes.

Key Takeaways from Staff Listening Sessions

Staff are seeking clear, consistent communication and additional details regarding student impact, program continuity, facility readiness, staffing implications, and transition planning as realignment discussions continue.