

PPS parents say academics, consistency should be among the board's top goals

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Pittsburgh Public Schools parents and community members want to see the district sharpen its approach to academics, social skills and career readiness.

That's according to survey data presented to school board members Tuesday night. Board members collected survey responses and held [12 listening sessions](#) this spring in an effort to determine community-driven, measurable goals for the years ahead.

Participants were asked what "students should know or be able to do" as a result of their time at PPS. Their answers emphasized academics, social skills and career exploration, as well as the need for experienced and well-resourced teachers, practices tailored to each student's needs and continued community engagement.

The board's goal-setting efforts come as school closure plans remain in flux. Many parents surveyed stressed the need for consistency if and when the district transitions to a new footprint.

Superintendent Wayne Walters' [latest facilities proposal](#) would shutter nine buildings, phase out most magnet programs and redraw attendance zones.

Director Sylvia Wilson called the timing of the listening sessions — distinct from town halls previously held to solicit feedback on potential school closures — "unfortunate".

"Some people came to these sessions with only the facilities presentation in their mind," Wilson said. "We lost a few people who were upset because that's not what we were talking about, and some others slipped in some things that had to do directly with the facilities plans."

In addition to the feedback provided by the couple dozen community members present at each listening session, school board members received 60 survey responses.

Board member Devon Taliaferro voiced concern about the low turnout, attributing it to the burnout and unease many PPS families feel more than a year into conversations about school closures.

"Transitioning and changing a school district of over 18,000 students is major and it can't be taken lightly," Taliaferro said. "But I think it has, in some ways, been maybe not taken in

consideration that that's a major haul for everybody, on top of the community feeling tossed in the wind.”

During a separate committee meeting Monday, PPS chief financial officer Ron Joseph told board members the most recent consolidation proposal would save the district \$3.2 million in 2026. Joseph said the district would see greater savings in the years that follow as they close schools and restructure programs.

But even with school closures — and a potential tax hike — Joseph said the district would still need to carve out an additional \$22.2 million to balance the district’s preliminary 2026 budget.

“We have our work cut out for us, and we have a lot of difficult decisions potentially ahead of us,” Joseph said.

The district hopes to raise revenue by [forcing a countywide property reassessment](#) and ending the [ongoing diversion of earned income taxes](#) to the City of Pittsburgh. Both practices are the subjects of ongoing lawsuits.

But school board president Gene Walker said, until those cases are resolved, the district has few options beyond taxation.

“I’ve been opposed to raising taxes my entire time on the board because I don’t think that, without some of the other levers being pulled, that it makes a huge difference,” Walker said. “I don’t know if I feel that way anymore because we’re backed against a corner.”

“We’re back against the wall to where we have to bring in money however we can.”

Next steps

Last year, PPS approved a \$100,000 contract with the **Council of Great City Schools (CGCS)** for board coaching services. The board has increased its focus on community engagement and goal-setting as part of that process, and passed a [slate of streamlining governance policies](#) with guidance from CGCS in February.

The process will ultimately lead to the school board adopting measurable goals that guide the district’s actions for the next three to five years. But Ben Mackey, a consultant with CGCS, recommended Tuesday that the board host additional listening sessions as it refines and monitors the goals it chooses.

“It can be a constant conversation that builds more trust with the community,” Mackey said.

The next step, according to Mackey, will be a multi-hour workshop in which board members and PPS administrators narrow down potential goals. He recommended that the process be done publicly so that community members may share feedback with the board.