

90.5 WESA

Calls for transparency, flexibility in wake of initial PPS school closures proposals

90.5 WESA | By [Jillian Forstadt](#)

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Community members on the North Side voiced their concerns about potential changes coming to Pittsburgh Public Schools on Tuesday night.

The meeting at Allegheny Traditional Academy (ATA), which houses both a K-5 and 6-8 magnet school, was the first of several input sessions the district is hosting across the city over the next few weeks.

Administrators say they're looking to gather feedback on a set of proposals consultants hired by the district presented earlier this month. Their [initial recommendations](#) include closing 16 schools, reconfiguring grade structures and phasing out many of the district's magnet programs.

Under that plan, if moved forward, the magnet program at Allegheny K-5 would be phased out, and Allegheny 6-8 would be closed. Middle school students would instead attend a larger, combined middle school at the building currently serving King PreK-8.

King, a neighborhood school, is located just blocks from Allegheny Traditional Academy. The resources available to students at the two schools, however, differs greatly, due in part to ATA's magnet status.

"We know that in our district we've seen tremendous pockets of success, but we need to think about how we can transform education for our entire district," said PPS superintendent Wayne Walters.

Many attendees spoke in favor of making sure students in every part of the district are able to access equitable resources and programming. But parents like Sarah Hirebet, whose two students graduated from ATA said that shouldn't come at the expense of schools like hers.

"If we want equity for all students, then we think about what is excellent and we fund [that], making sure that that's available at all schools," Hirebet said. "But never reduce the excellence that's already available at schools like ATA."

At the same time, other parents noted that the magnet schools that allow families to choose where their students attend may come at the expense of students at shrinking neighborhood schools.

One of those buildings is Spring Hill, a small elementary school on the North Side. It currently serves roughly 120 students, and is one of the schools to close under the consultants' initial proposal.

Sherry Dumrauf said she still lives in the city because of that neighborhood school, which one of her four children still attends.

“If you want to change that, I know that not only myself — there are several parents that feel the same as me — we will be pulling out of our houses, selling them and moving to the suburbs,” Dumrauf said.

A return to in-person meetings

Parents this week are also raising concerns about transparency and engagement with regard to the school board’s monthly public hearing. It’s a chance for parents, students, staff and other stakeholders to comment on the board’s voting agenda and related matters.

The district announced last month that public hearings would transition back to a fully in-person format in August following “careful consideration of public health guidelines.” The meetings were conducted virtually — with all testimony given over Zoom — at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a hybrid format was implemented in November 2023.

Written testimony may still be submitted and, as of this week, is [posted to the district’s website](#). School board president Gene Walker said he spoke with the district’s solicitor and the **Council of Great City Schools** — which has [a \\$100,000 contract](#) for board coaching services with the district — to hear what other districts were doing before making the switch.

“It just makes sense for us to bring a bit more structure to how we were doing these meetings,” Walker told WESA.

But speakers at the district’s public hearing on Monday said the decision to return to fully in-person meetings doesn’t account for the other barriers families face in getting to Oakland, where the district’s administration building is located.

Marisa Fleming, whose son attends Fulton PreK-5 in Highland Park, described herself as a single parent who can’t just “jump in the car and go.” It was close to 9 p.m. by the time she spoke, with her other child in tow.

“This is not efficient for me,” Fleming said. “I take public transportation, so afterward I’m going to get an Uber or wait for a ride.”

Lauren Abt, whose children attend Manchester PreK-8 on the North Side, said that because of the decision to move the meetings fully in-person, she had to bring her two young children to Oakland “right before bedtime.” Her older kids, meanwhile, were “at home having dinner with their grandfather instead of their parents after the first day of school.”

“I’m lucky that I have unlimited access to a car, no inflexible employment schedule, no disability or illness — at least not yet this year — to keep me from being here yet,” Abt said.

She added that the district should offer childcare during the public hearing if parents aren’t given a virtual option.

While Walker said he recognized that in-person meetings may make it more difficult for some, he said “we all prioritize what’s most important.”

“And if it’s important, we will figure out a way,” he continued.

Pittsburgh Public isn't the only district in the region to have offered virtual participation during board meetings. Families at Mt. Lebanon School District continue to participate in school board meetings via Zoom, and speakers at Pine-Richland can address the board over the phone during sessions.

PPS director Jamie Piotrowski said the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for flexible and accessible options across sectors.

With that in mind, she said board members should be working to reduce barriers to public participation and allow a broader range of voices to be heard.

While [board policy](#) notes the school board's monthly public hearing is held inside the district's administration building, the procedures do not specify whether participants must attend in person or if they can communicate virtually.

"I think we're at a point where we need to continue to offer and expand modern avenues for people to submit their opinions and comments on District matters, especially at a time when the District is working on the Facilities Utilization Plan," Piotrowski told WESA over email.

"If other Districts, the City of Pittsburgh, the URA etc. offer a hybrid public comment function, why shouldn't PPS?" she added.