

School Closings: The Big Picture Summary

“Any school closing decisions must be made within a broader, strategic planning framework that encompasses an open, equitable process, with frequent communication.”
- Participant notes from September 7th public meeting

A+ Schools heard that sentiment loud and clear after hosting two public meetings and conducting a scientific survey to ask community members to comment on how they thought school closings should be handled in the Pittsburgh Public Schools and what criteria should be used to close them.

Schools must be closed in order for the District to be fiscally sound and concentrate resources in classroom instruction. All school buildings are valuable community assets and warrant the attention of all stakeholders – parents, taxpayers and the business community. It’s critical that the community be confident in the process and that the decisions made are fair and objective.

A+ Schools tried to contribute to this process by giving the community an opportunity to recommend constructive, objective criteria for school closings. Our goal was to raise the level of conversation to one of how we want our city to look in the future and what experiences we want our children to have.

Ultimately, the community responded by giving us their best thinking, working together coming to consensus on some big ideas. We’ve transformed their thoughts into recommendations:

- That the Pittsburgh Public Schools welcome true community participation in the school closing process;

- That the Pittsburgh Public Schools count achievement as the highest factor in keeping school buildings open;

- That clear criteria created and shared before any decisions are made;

- That the feeder patterns be disclosed and explained to the public; and

- That the Pittsburgh Public Schools create a long range facilities plan in tandem with city agencies and neighborhoods.

Purpose: August 17th

On Wednesday, August 17, 2005 from 5:30 to 8:30 PM, A+ Schools hosted a community meeting to discuss factors and values, such as student achievement, safety, cost, diversity, and convenience that should go into policy making decisions in configuring school facilities for Pittsburgh Public Schools. The meeting was held at the IBEW, Local #5 on the South Side with approximately 70 participants.

The purpose of the meeting was to gauge the community’s preferences – which of a host of factors do they believe must go into making decisions about school closings.

Meeting Summary

To bring a national perspective to school closings and reconfiguration, A+ Schools brought in two national speakers, both with extensive experience in working with

communities and schools in trying to create solutions around school facilities and grade configurations.

How Other Communities Approach the Issue

Mary Filardo and Jacqueline Leavy, *Closing Public Schools: Criteria, Community Engagement and Alternatives*

The presentation can be found in the Appendix.

Mary Filardo founded the organization 21st Century School Fund (21CSF) in 1994 to provide the District of Columbia and other urban communities leadership, innovative financing solutions, research, and public policy analysis of school facility issues. She has written extensively on these public school facility issues and developed software to support long-range facilities master planning. Before establishing 21CSF, she worked for 25 years in the private sector in building and residential construction management. She was also an active public school parent during the sixteen years her children were in public school.

Jacqueline Leavy established the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group (NCBG), a city-wide organization and research institute in Chicago, to promote increased citizen involvement in urban planning and public budgeting and increased local government investment in urban infrastructure. She is responsible for shaping NCBG's ongoing research program and advocacy efforts regarding increased investment in public transit infrastructure and citizen participation in transportation planning, public budgeting policy reforms, increased capital investment in public school facilities, and coordination of capital investment by local governments around community assets to support and stimulate community economic and transit oriented development.

Filardo and Leavy presented information about their joint project called BEST, the Building Educational Success Together project. It is a constituency building, research and communications collaboration led by the 21st Century School Fund. BEST partners are located in Washington, DC; Newark, NJ; Chicago, IL; Louisiana; New York City, NY; Cincinnati, OH; and the University of New York at Stonybrook. Together they work to bring comprehensive community-based educational facility planning to communities; they believe that schools are the natural centers of communities; they support responsible management of public school facility inventory and improvements; and support sustained and adequate funding for building maintenance and capital projects.

Both Filardo and Leavy have experience in building collaborations between communities and schools in their respective cities. In Washington, DC, the student population is declining and the school district has closed schools in 1993, 1995 and 1997. The Chicago Public Schools has been closing and rebuilding schools since 2000.

Filardo and Leavy also came to challenge and question our beliefs. They suggested that the community ask, "Are school closings really necessary and how do we know that they are?" In order to answer that question, the community needs more information about the pressures on the operating budget, future capital projects, enrollment decline or shifts, the education program and the demand for school land and school buildings.

They also challenged assumptions about the number of schools by saying "too much space is different than too many schools." Some buildings may need to be down-sized,

others may be able to be kept open if paying non-school tenants were to occupy the excess space.

They also asked a very important question that the Pittsburgh community needs to answer: What is Pittsburgh's vision? As two examples, is it a system of small, neighborhood based, high quality public schools? Is it a system of high quality schools located to minimize transportation challenges and support student diversity?

Those are the questions that need to be answered, the information that needs to be gathered and the assumptions that need to be challenged to help the school district advance a successful plan.

Our next speaker was Ken Sochats who brought demographic information about the city and school district.

Information about Pittsburgh

Ken Sochats, A Demographic View of the Pittsburgh Public Schools
The presentation can be found in the Appendix.

Ken Sochats is the Director of the Visual Information Systems Center at the University of Pittsburgh. He has over thirty years of experience in the Computer and Telecommunications industries. He holds advanced degrees in Electrical Engineering and Business Administration. After spending several years at Westinghouse Electric Corporation where his work resulted in several inventions and patents, he accepted a faculty position at the University of Pittsburgh. He has taught over twenty-five different courses in telecommunications, computing, systems and business.

Sochats showed a slide of the enrollment by grade in the Pittsburgh Public Schools showing a steep drop out rate from 9th to 10th grades that continues to decline to 12th grade. Sochats garnered applause with his comment that if we could find a way to keep these students in school and graduate them from PPS, there would be no need to close any high schools.

Sochats' slides included maps of the density by neighborhood of the PPS student population, maps of where the African American students are, where the children receiving free and reduced lunches are, and even where students living with single mothers are.

Sochats also presented analysis of the PPS' Feeder Patterns and showed some of the anomalies in them. For instance, children living right across the street from each other, attending the same elementary and middle schools, may be directed to different high schools. Similarly, children living within two blocks of each other in Homewood on Kelley Street will go to four different elementary schools, two different middle schools and yet all arrive at the same high school. In one zip code alone, 15206, there are 10 elementary feeder schools.

Break Outs – What You Thought

Our break out groups had much to discuss when given the charge to work on several questions provided by A+ Schools. The groups worked for an hour.

Question 1

A+ Schools is trying to understand what the community values in terms of school buildings and student assignments to those buildings. These factors or values could be translated into criteria for PPS to utilize in making facilities decisions. We're going to ask you to respond to a list of factors and tell us if you think these are the right factors, if they should be restated and/if there are any we are missing –

- a. Racial and economic diversity*
- b. Student safety in traveling to school*
- c. Student safety while at school*
- d. Minimizing the disruption of students by being re-assigned to new schools because of closures and reconfigurations*
- e. Planning for future population growth and decline among different sections of the City.*
- f. Students attending a school in their neighborhood at each level of education (elementary, middle, and high school)*
- g. Cost savings achieved by using buildings that require less investment to maintain or update to provide a full range of services*
- h. Richness of curricular offerings that are available at individual schools*
- i. Richness of extracurricular offerings that are available at individual schools.*

Participants added **student achievement data** as a criteria. Most felt that high achieving schools should be kept open. There was also agreement that every school in the district offer academic excellence and that every school be a high achieving school.

Cost savings and the **minimization of disrupting students** by re-assigning them to schools were very highly agreed upon by our participants as was asking for a definition of proper **building capacity**.

Three strongly agreed upon criteria that A+ Schools did not list as options were expressed. The insistence that the Pittsburgh Public Schools create a **transparent community process with clearly stated criteria**, that the Public Schools work closely and **coordinate planning with the City and the community**, and that the Public Schools **create a long range comprehensive or master plan** for their facilities.

Participants generally agreed with the list of points that A+ Schools presented and added some of their own. **Racial and economic diversity** was the criteria most agreed upon, and also the most questioned criteria. Some asked that the trade off between neighborhood schools and racial diversity be recognized, citing Pittsburgh's segregated neighborhoods, while another participant asked if racial and economic diversity can even be achieved by reconfiguring the schools. Still another participant thought that racial and economic diversity be a low priority of the school district when considering a plan for closing schools.

Question 2

What information is needed for the public to participate fully in discussions and decisions about school facilities and school closings? What questions would you like answers to for the next meeting?

Participants called for **demographic data**, wishing to understand how many students live in Pittsburgh, how many of them attend private and parochial schools and how they

might be attracted to attend the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Studying the city's population growth and decline was suggested as well as comparative information for the entire city.

Similarly, participants thought that having **achievement data** would be helpful in determining how to close schools. They called for PSSA and other achievement data, class size, the number of empty seats, safety records and transportation routes.

Per pupil spending, capacity and **cost savings** were also data thought to be most important to have access to, as well as feeling that the School District should disclose its **feeder patterns**.

(A break down of everything noted on individual flip charts is included in the Appendix.)

Survey

At the close of the meeting, people were directed to an on-line survey asking more detailed questions about their priorities and thoughts around school closings. A+ Schools released the survey with the intention of fine tuning what was said in the community meeting on August 17th.

Purpose: September 7th

"We have raised many important issues, considered a broad range of new ideas, and heard from many different voices during this dialogue," said Esther Bush, chair-elect of the Board of A+ Schools, on the evening of the September 7th meeting. "Now we will gather our collective learning and craft recommendations for how the School District should engage the community and proceed with a process and criteria for moving forward with school closings and other facilities decisions."

The findings from the on-line survey as well as findings from a deliberative democracy research project at Carnegie Mellon University that took place last summer were presented for community consideration at this meeting. Participants at the meeting had the opportunity to recommend constructive, objective processes, policies, and criteria for school closings.

Meeting Summary

Survey Results and Follow Up

Ken Sochats: Review of the A+ Schools Survey
The full presentation is included in the Appendix.

The meeting started with Ken Sochats reviewing the survey data collected between the August 17th and September 7th meetings. At that time, 308 respondents were counted. 246 were white and 33 were African American. A+ Schools, in seeking a greater number and diversity of respondents, choose to keep the survey open for an additional three weeks and to aggressively seek responses through the wide distribution of a paper version of the survey. The final survey results are reported here.

Who Responded

A total of 495 people responded to the survey. 453 of those live in the City of Pittsburgh and 42 do not. 348 out of the 453 respondents were women, only 129 were men. 213 of the respondents had a child in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, while 261 did not have

children in school at all. 39 had children in private school and 18 had children in both private and public school.

Of the respondents, 262 were parents of children. 178 considered themselves “concerned citizens.” The rest were family members or guardians.

The average age of the respondents was 43. In terms of race, 350 of the 453 respondents were white. 88 were African American. 34 did not report their race.

The Responses

The first question, “Which grade configuration do you prefer for children in grades 6 to 8?” had the following options:

1. Two schools: Kindergarten to 5th grade, then 6th grade to 8th grade (Middle Schools)
2. One school: Kindergarten to 8th grade (K-8)
3. Both Kindergarten to 8th grade and Kindergarten to 5th grade with available
4. No Preference

Here, there was almost equal preference for Middle Schools as there was for K-8 schools. 187 respondents preferred the Middle School option. 144 preferred the K-8 option outright. 95 people liked having both choices while 61 people had no preference.

Over half of the respondents answered yes to the second question, “Do you believe we should close schools?” 136 people were not sure and 89 respondents answered no.

Over 80% of the respondents answered yes to the question, “Should PPS publicly disclose the feeder patterns (student assignment locations) for schools?” 24 of the 453 respondents said no and 45 had no preference.

To the fourth question, “Should PPS have a published 10 year plan for schools?” again over 80% said yes.

The fifth question, “Which of the following data do you need to fully participate in a school closing discussion?” the following options were given:

1. Square footage of each school building
2. Age of each school building
3. Physical condition of each school building
4. How functional capacity is determined
5. Percent of students attending a school outside their feeder pattern
6. Cost of actual instruction per student
7. Other

Respondents most wanted to know more about the Building Condition (72.84%) and the how Functional Capacity is determined (73.05%). The Percent of students attending a school outside of their feeder pattern was next in popularity at 67.08%. Understanding the Instruction Cost came next at 60.70%. Building footage and Building Age were the least requested information at 33.74% and 35.60% respectively.

The last question asked respondents to rank the following options for criteria for closing schools from 1 to 9, with 1 being the highest priority. When looking at the aggregate numbers, the following results were found:

1. Safe School Environment
2. Curricular Offerings
3. Safe Travel to School
4. Diversity of Student Population
5. Minimize the Disruption of Students
6. Future Stability
7. Students Attending Neighborhood Schools
8. Extracurricular Offerings
9. Cost Savings

It should be noted that A+ Schools believes that improving student achievement and shrinking the racial achievement gap are the most important factors in making school facilities decisions and so were not listed as choices. They were considered to be a given which was confirmed in the responses from the two public meetings.

When the responses are disaggregated, the following responses were found:

	All	City Residents	Non City Residents	African Americans
Safe School Environment	1	1	1	2
Curricular Offerings	2	2	3	1
Safe Travel to School	3	3	2	4
Diversity of Student Population	4	4	4	3
Minimize the Disruption of Students	5	5	5	5
Future Stability	6	6	7	7
Students Attending Neighborhood Schools	7	8	6	8
Extracurricular Offerings	8	7	8	6
Cost Savings	9	9	9	9

Deliberative Democracy Research

Ron Gdovic and Peter Muhlberger: Review of the InSites Project Findings
The full presentation is included in the Appendix.

Ronald Gdovic, the Executive Director of InSITEs, the Institute for the Study of Information Technology and Society and Dr. Peter Muhlberger, a professor at the H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management at Carnegie Mellon University who's research interests include deliberative democracy and ways to facilitate the democratic process via various information and communications technologies, spoke next. They reported on the findings of a deliberative democracy study undertaken in July 2004. The project brought a representative sample of 568 Pittsburgh city residents to Carnegie Mellon University to participate in a day-long learning and discussion experience concerning school consolidation and educational improvements in Pittsburgh city schools.

All of the participants were given two 40 minute periods to examine information about five policies: closing schools in the future generally, eliminating 4500 seats over three years specifically, eliminating middle schools by going to a K-8 system, adding small

learning communities to the high schools, and choice of schools within larger geographical regions. Two thirds of participants deliberated in groups of 12 or fewer about the policy issues. One third were placed in a no-discussion control group for purposes of social science research.

Four of the five policies examined received support from majorities of participants. The four policies were: closing schools in general, eliminating 4500 seats, eliminating middle schools and adding small learning communities to the high schools. Participants views were mixed on regional choice.

Break Outs – What You Thought

Again the participants of the community meeting were broken out into small discussion groups to talk over questions prepared by A+ Schools. The groups worked for an hour. Their responses follow:

Question 1

*What recommendations should be made to the Pittsburgh Public Schools about the **process** for making school closings and other facilities decisions?*

Overwhelmingly our participants asked that there be **community involvement** in the school closing process. They asked for **clear criteria** and **access to data** and information. They believed there should be **long term planning** and that **data should drive the decision making**. They also felt strongly that **student achievement** should be a factor in making decisions.

Question 2

*What recommendations should be made to the Pittsburgh Public Schools about **student assignment** and **feeder patterns**?*

Participants felt that **geography** and **topography** should be taken into consideration when making changes. **Transportation costs** and **driving distances** should also be taken into account. In terms of the feeder patterns, there was a general consensus that they be disclosed to the public, based on accurate data and “rational.” Some felt that the feeder patterns should be “scrapped” while other felt they just needed to be “cleaned up.”

Question 3

*What recommendations should be made to the Pittsburgh Public Schools about **criteria** for closing schools?*

The most strongly supported criteria was **student achievement** data. Most believed that high academic achievement, quality teaching and leadership and closing the achievement was the most important criteria to keep when closing schools.

Question 4

*What other recommendations should be made to the Pittsburgh Public Schools about **facilities** and school closing decisions?*

The three most mentioned recommendations from the community were considering the **building condition** in school closings, **matching re-use options with community needs** and considering the **cost of renovations**.

Participants across the room also had one other concern, the School Board. Although not specifically asked, many expressed a **lack of trust in the School Board**. They recognized the politics around school closings in the past and believed that the Board should be held accountable for their decisions.

There were other recommendations and they are all listed in the Appendix.

What it All Means – Recommendations from the Community

Overall, there was consensus in both meetings about the following themes. These themes constitute A+ Schools recommendations to the Pittsburgh Public Schools School Board and administration.

Community Participation

There must be more effort made to garner true community participation in the process of closing schools. This should include parents, non-parents, community leaders, the business community, school principals, school administrators and others. School closings should be a community process.

Achievement is a factor/Performance should count

The focus of the school closing conversation should not be the utilization and business of facilities but on achievement, teacher quality and administrative continuance. Student achievement should be analyzed not just by test score, but by looking at the school as a whole including extracurricular offerings, and staff and principal performance. The school closing/reconfiguration strategy should be constructed to impact learning.

Transparency in the decision making process

Clear criteria/guiding principals/rationale

Use clear quantifiable data to remove politics

The school board and administration should have clear and quantifiable measures for closing schools that are communicated to the public BEFORE any decisions are made. The process for closing schools should be clearly communicated. The rationale for school closings should be easy to understand, clear and non-political.

Revist/Revamp the feeder patterns

The feeder patterns should be disclosed, in an understandable way, to the public. The school reconfiguration study might also be an opportunity to “clean up” the feeder patterns, and base them on geography, or to “scrap them” altogether.

Strategic/Long range plan

Develop a plan that incorporates all of the above comments and also looks at student demographic data, neighborhood data, housing trends and general city-wide demographic.