



February 17, 2025

To: Pittsburgh Public Schools Administration and Northside Board Members

Subject: Highlights from Community Engagement Sessions on Facility Utilization Plan

The One Northside Education Committee, in partnership with Kidcelerate, a Northside based non-profit focused on improving the lives of children, **convened a series of community meetings to give Northside residents an opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) Facility Utilization Plan.** The meetings were held from November 2024 through January 2025 and 70+ residents participated in the discussions.

Access to high quality education has been a priority for Northside residents for many years. The Northside Leadership Conference formed an education committee in 2011 and in 2014 it was transitioned to One Northside. It has always been led by residents, including our original co-chairs, PPS Board Director Dwayne Barker and Northside resident and PPS parent, Chris Sweeney.

The [report that follows below](#), which will also be distributed to residents who attended the meetings and Northside community leaders, includes a summary of the feedback we received at the community meetings. Below are some highlights, along with a few recommendations on how we might work collaboratively with PPS to continue these vital resident conversations and ensure any changes to Northside schools and feeder patterns ensure equitable access and the highest quality schools PreK-12.

- **Northside residents prefer a middle school location that is centrally located with access to greater amenities and public transportation.** Many are confused by the choice of Manchester elementary and don't think it is the best option.
- **Community members and leaders in Northview Heights are excited about the plans to reopen Northview Elementary** and think it could bring together children and families in the neighborhood in ways that aren't possible when the kids attend different schools.
- **Northside residents value a wide range of attributes when selecting a school for their children.** Feedback on the facility utilization plan seemed to disproportionately focus on the school location/neighborhood proximity issue. Residents value safety, academic programming, school and classroom size, transportation access/options and



high-quality educators. *(23% of Northside families select PPS schools outside of the Northside and 37% select non-PPS schools)*

Residents of all ages and demographics, with and without children, still have many questions and concerns, both about the details of the emerging school consolidation and closing plan, and how PPS will work collaboratively with residents and families to ensure all changes increase quality learning experience and opportunity for all Northside children.

The One Northside Education Committee proposes the following recommendations to explore a collaborative process with Pittsburgh Public Schools to:

- Gather representative and comprehensive feedback from Northside residents on the best facility for the new Middle School.
- Design and reopen Northview Heights elementary school.
- Ensure every Northside school offers high-quality learning and opportunity.
- Increase resident access to accurate and timely information about PPS plans and vision for Northside schools to decrease the number of families selecting non-PPS schools for their children.

We look forward to hearing from you and scheduling a meeting to discuss these findings and recommendations. Please contact One Northside Education Committee Co-Chair and PPS Parent, Charis Walker at cwalker@kidcelerate.org.

Sincerely,

One Northside Education Committee



Community Engagement Sessions

November 2024 - January 2025

Meeting Summary: (4) sessions, 70+ attendees

- November 7, 2024: Destiny of Faith Church, (25 attendees)
- November 14, 2024: Urban Impact | Pittsburgh Project, (18 attendees)
- December 3, 2024: Allegheny Center Alliance Church (12 attendees)
- January 15, 2025: Northview Heights Recreation Center (16 attendees)

Community Feedback Highlights

Facility Closures and Reconfiguration Considerations

- **Northside residents prefer a middle school location that is centrally located with access to greater amenities and public transportation.** Many are confused by the choice of Manchester Elementary and don't think it is the best option.
 - King, ATA and Oliver all appear to have more support and better amenities than Manchester (which was built as an elementary school). There are concerns that the prior violent incidents outside of Oliver's campus are still an issue for residents.
 - Residents are skeptical that the comprehensive middle school would offer better opportunities/resources, leveraging the best programs from the existing schools. Fearing instead that the worst attributes of the lowest performing schools would overshadow the positives.
 - The One Northside education team recommends a collaborative process with PPS to get more comprehensive feedback from Northside residents on the best facility for a comprehensive Middle School.
- **Community members and leaders in Northview Heights were excited about the plans to reopen Northview Elementary** and think it could bring together children and families in the neighborhood in ways that aren't possible when the kids attend different schools.
 - They have questions about how it would work and whether students from other parts of the area would also attend Northview (like Spring Hill).
 - They seemed reluctant to get their hopes up, saying they have been disappointed too many times in the past.

- Initial anecdotal feedback was that the response from other neighboring communities such as Spring Hill and Perry North was not favorable.
- The One Northside education team recommends a collaborative process with PPS to discuss the plans for Northview Elementary with Northview residents and the surrounding neighborhoods that would feed into the new school.
- **Northside residents value a wide range of attributes when selecting a school** for their children.
 - Feedback on the facility utilization plan seemed to disproportionately focus on the school location/neighborhood proximity issue.
 - Northside enrollment data shows that location is not the only driver of school selection (23% select PPS schools in other parts of the city and 37% select non-PPS schools)
 - While location matters, many other factors were raised in our community discussions. The top factors mentioned by Northside residents include:
 - **Safety** (consistently #1), both at school and as students travel to and from school
 - **Academic Programming/Strong Achievement Results**
 - **School and Classroom Size** (many concerns expressed about classroom sizes)
 - **Transportation Options**
 - **High Quality Teachers** that care with support services available for students with special needs (IEP, GIEP, ELL, etc.)
 - A detailed list of all the factors mentioned is available [here](#) (on page 6)
- **Facility Utilization Questions**
 - How will PPS handle transportation challenges for schools that are not easily accessible via public transportation?
 - Families would like to better understand how “swing” schools will be used during periods of facility renovation.
 - What enrollment scenarios are PPS considering for the Northside schools and as proposed, what capacity is available to support enrollment growth?
 - How is PPS planning to better align staffing to enrollment, ensuring every building has quality teachers to deliver the full range of academic and enrichment offerings?



Longer Term School Quality Considerations

- How will PPS determine the optimal size for schools (at each grade configuration) and classrooms?
- How will PPS ensure that strong performing programs, like those currently at Schiller and ATA, will not be marginalized by the proposed changes?
- Since K-8 magnets are being eliminated (or drastically scaled back), how will magnet type special programming be embedded in the new/remaining schools?
- How is PPS planning to leverage community partnerships, cultural assets and innovative instructional strategies to ensure these are high performing schools that Northside students want to attend?
- How is PPS planning to fund the modernization investments and building construction costs associated with the plan? Is PPS considering other sales, like the Bellefield administrative building?

While much of the current focus is on the school consolidation and closing plan, Northside residents want assurances that all the newly reconfigured schools are designed to deliver high quality educational experiences for all students. The One Northside education committee would love to explore opportunities to work with PPS to help make every school on the Northside the best it can be and encourage more families to select PPS Northside schools for their children.

DETAILED SESSION NOTES

Priorities for our Schools

Here are the factors that Northside community members noted as the things that **matter to us** when selecting a school for our children:

- Safety: both in the school and safe routes to and from the schools (*raised in every meeting*)
 - Safety, especially when bringing together children from different communities and backgrounds. Many still recall the violence and other issues when Oliver and Perry merged.
- Education programming options and historical academic performance
 - Equity of programming and supports across all schools
 - Access to diverse programming - academic and enrichment (arts, music, STEM, etc.)
- Adequate transportation and safe routes to and from school
 - Location of school, ability to walk to school or access to good transportation options
 - PRT needs to be at the table since so many issues stem from transportation.
- Size of school and classroom size
 - Striking the balance of big enough to have resources but not overwhelming, especially for our youngest students
- Magnet, gifted and elective options within the school (with consistency of experiences across schools)
- High quality teachers that care about our kids
- Student support resources (counselors, wrap-around services)
- Facility amenities and outdoor fields/play areas
 - Ensuring students have access to facilities with the amenities and spaces where they want to learn (for example - middle school students have access to pools, fields, science labs, etc.)
- Access to healthy, nutritious food
- Parent - teacher communication and collaboration
- Diversity of students and staff
- Strong partnerships, including before and after school programs
- Ability for students to connect with other kids across PPS (noted as a loss if removing the Gifted Center)
- Consistent and stable experiences - make sure classrooms are staffed

- Community schools - support and programming available to students and their families
- Quality instruction - raise the standard for all students.
- Quality support for students with an IEP and GIEP.
- Strong science, art and music programs
- Connection to local resources and assets
- Language support resources

In the sections that follow, we aggregated the feedback from the four sessions into the following categories:

- [General Questions/Feedback – Northside K-5 Schools](#)
- [General Questions/Feedback – Northside 6-8 Schools](#)
- [General Questions/Feedback – Northside High School](#)
- [General Questions/Feedback – Northside Schools](#)
- [General Questions/Feedback – District Level](#)

General Questions/Feedback – Northside K-5 Schools

- While resource constraints for smaller schools (with declining enrollment is an issue), big is not necessarily better for our youngest students. What does PPS view as the ideal total enrollment for a K-5 school and what do they envision as the target class sizes?
- Beyond the buildings, what other amenities (outdoor spaces, fields, etc.) are available at these locations?
- How and where will magnet and/or gifted programs be embedded in the Northside elementary schools? For example, can one of them offer a Montessori type program?
- Is it possible to offer families a choice (within a regional school type context)? What are the pros and cons?
- Northview Heights
 - Reopening Northview would give the students in the community a chance to get to know each other better (not possible now with children attending different schools)
 - What other students would come to Northview and how would PPS manage the assimilation of these students?
 - Would love Northview to be set up as a “community school” model with more access to arts, music and other enrichments opportunities
 - Concerns about a new Northview Heights feeling isolated and disconnected from a diverse group of students.

- o While the demographics (families with PreK-5 children) in Northview Heights appear to support the reopening of the school there, some residents have expressed a concern that the student population will lack diversity (particularly from an economic standpoint).
 - There are also concerns that families from neighboring communities (Spring Hill) would not want to send their children to Northview.
 - Has PPS considered expanding the capacity of Spring Hill (instead of rebuilding Northview Elementary)?
- o In what ways can PPS partner with the Housing Authority of Pittsburgh to address some of the community concerns? For example, are the security gates still necessary?

General Questions/Feedback – Northside 6-8 Schools

- How can we learn from prior consolidations/reconfigurations like Oliver/Perry, Wilkinsburg/Westinghouse, Brashear/Langle, etc.?
- For the middle schools, how can we preserve the “best” of each school (culture, academic programming, enrichment activities) in the new school?
- Why did the recommendation shift from King to Manchester? It’s not clear that the residents agree with the findings of the consultant. They might reflect a small number of loud voices.
- Why was King removed as the middle school option? Was King removed because the PPS can get money for the property?
- Is Oliver a potential candidate for the comprehensive MS? How will PPS arrive at a final recommendation and to what degree will community members have input in the decision?
- If Northview Elementary reopens, why would it only be for grades K-5? We have many 6-8 grade kids here.
- Can PPS consider Allegheny or Oliver as the middle school option since they were both high schools and have better amenities?
- What will the magnet and/or gifted program offerings entail at the new middle school?
- Will Schiller programming remain intact at a new middle school?
- What transportation options will be offered if Manchester or Oliver are selected?
- What are the relative capacities of King, Manchester and Schiller?
- What is the extent of the renovations envisioned at Manchester? Can that be justified versus the expected costs to modernize King or Oliver? (King already has AC).

- How will the new middle school leverage partners and the cultural/business/higher ed assets on the Northside to enhance and enrich programming?
- What is the student/teacher ratio for a middle school and how can families have guarantees that larger schools don't mean overcrowded classrooms.
- Families want a career-ready middle school that provides access and exposure to a wide variety of opportunities.
- Will PPS ensure additional resources, such as paraprofessionals, social workers, counselors, etc. are added to middle schools?
- How will PPS help to mitigate potential neighborhood violence issues?
- What transition plans will be in place to ensure students, staff and families work across schools to support positive transitions for all students?
- Will PPS be prepared to manage transitions to virtual learning effectively moving forward?
- How will students' social/emotional health be prioritized? Middle school transitions are already hard enough.
- How will PPS ensure high-quality instruction?

General Questions/Feedback – Northside High School

- Perry is improving with Ms. O'Malley as the leader.
- What additional programs are envisioned for Perry HS?
- How can PPS expand and leverage partnerships to enhance Perry learning experiences?
 - CCAC dual enrollment
 - Cultural assets, sports teams, businesses, etc.
- Is Perry the right facility long term? Should Oliver be considered? What are the relative strengths/weaknesses?
- How can we increase parent engagement?
- Can we move to a more student-centered instructional model where students take more ownership of their learning experiences?
- Why doesn't the school have basics like cooking, sewing, and driving or more job preparation classes such as business classes, carpentry, etc. These programs were mentioned as existing decades ago but do not exist now.
- School needs help changing the negative perception.
- The quality of teaching is mixed at Perry. Some do not seem effectively trained.
- Not a high level of engagement of students. Most students do not value school.

- There are fights at Perry causing disruptions in the school. The root cause is due to students within the Perry feeder pattern being returned to the school from magnet schools, or an ESL center like Brashear. The transitions disrupt the school environment.
- Suspensions provide students with opportunities to make money. It is believed that Internships and half-day work programs would increase student engagement and attendance.
- School spirit is low. The school culture needs work.
- Need to increase extracurricular activities such as sports, marching band and clubs. These are the reasons children come to school.
- How do we get more students involved in activities at the elementary level across neighborhoods, so they feel like they know each other at high school.
- School needs more social workers, security and counselors. The current security team is unable to manage some of the fights and disruptions due to the size of the students.

General Questions/Feedback – Northside Schools

- Should we consider renaming some of the new schools, particularly if community perceptions have an impact on the choices Northside families will make for their students.
 - The example raised, several times, was King.
 - It is a fantastic location, but some families have baggage with persistent academic challenges and behavioral issues at the school (direct quote from a parent).
 - Does it matter if this is fair versus perceptions fueled by negative media coverage?
 - Need more information on the building itself and how well suited it would be to house the middle school (with capacity to grow).
- Once the schools are reconfigured, how much capacity (by grade band) would be available to support growth?
 - What enrollment scenarios will PPS be considering for the next 5 years?
 - 60% of school-aged children on the Northside currently opt for non-PPS schools or PPS schools outside the Northside. Has PPS considered the implications for long term enrollment if more of those students choose to attend the newly, reconfigured Northside schools?
 - Has PPS considered the impact of new housing development activities that are planned on the Northside?

- How is PPS planning to leverage the amazing resources on the Northside to support the new, reconfigured schools (cultural assets, businesses, sports teams, CCAC, hospitals, etc.)? How can we design “signature” schools on the Northside that draw in the same way the CAPA does?
- Is PPS planning to continue the community schools’ model on the Northside?
- What percentage of the student population (by school) will be IEP and/or students with special needs? How is PPS planning to support these students? What is the plan for regional classrooms?
- Where is PPS getting the resources for these major building renovations?
- Why don’t all schools offer language, algebra, STEAM in every school?
- How is PPS elevating the educational standard for all children across all schools with this new plan and ensuring that high quality schools like ATA do not lose quality or programming?
- How will PPS ensure all schools are adequately and consistently staffed? (this was mentioned as a key reason why families removed their children from King and Morrow and seen as a huge safety and academic concern)
- How can we build community?
- Can staff stay with the students, they currently serve as a part of the transitions and swings?
- Will additional mental health and social emotional learning be integrated into all schools consistently and available to all students/families?
- Can all elementary schools and middle schools have access to before and after care services?
- What additional electives will be added?
- What are the demographics at the gifted center? How are families notified of gifted services?
- What happens to the gifted program?
- What happens to students at Oliver?
- Strong feelings that PPS never invested in Northside schools like they have in the east.

General Questions/Feedback – District Level

- Where is PPS getting the capital for the facility modernization investments?
 - Is PPS considering the sale of the Bellefield building?
 - Does the Board envision the need for a tax increase? How does the tax increase proposed by Allegheny County impact the schools, if at all?

- Per Gene on Nov 14, the proposed Allegheny County tax increase (millage increase) will not directly impact the district unless the county also pushes for a re-assessment. There has not been one in 15 years.
- Indirectly a county tax increase might be beneficial to county funded support services that work with our schools.
- How is PPS planning to address transportation concerns?
 - Will PPS provide transportation to students living at address locations that aren't easily accessible via public transportation?
 - Is PPS planning to work collaboratively with the Port Authority to address the need for increased coverage at some of the proposed schools (like Manchester)?
- How does PPS communicate to the community and their ecosystem of partners when they have staff positions that are hard to fill (music, languages, etc.)?
- The plan is focused on facilities without consideration made for the quality of the school, programming or academics.
- Eliminating magnet options provides no options or reasons for families to send their children to PPS if they don't like their neighborhood assigned school. This forces families to leave or choose charter schools.
- How will PPS ensure smooth transitions accounting for neighborhood level issues, teacher retention and curricular alignment (Schiller programming to new middle school)
- Should PPS consider King as the site for the CAPA 6-8 program since it has flexible classrooms and is very close to the downtown building.

Parking Lot Post-its:

- We need to better publicize the strengths of our Northside schools
- Make school environments so teachers, students, and parents want to come to school.
- The Northside as a whole provides opportunities
- How will PPS handle matriculation through programs for buildings that close?
- Need more trades in all schools
- Need more parent involvement at middle and high school - need to advocate for this.
- More restorative practice school spaces
- Prioritize safety + relationship building so that awesome programs at Northside schools are attended.