



## LAWRENCEVILLE UNITED

A Resident Driven Organization

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### LU Testimony to the PPS Board of Education Public Hearing, 2/22/2021

**Good evening. My name is Dave Breingan and I'm the Executive Director of Lawrenceville United, a non-profit community organization dedicated to improving quality of life for all Lawrenceville residents.** Through our PEP Rally program, we have a long history of working with our neighborhood Pittsburgh Public Schools and the staff and families that attend them.

I'm writing today to speak about our extreme concern for the district's proposed reconfiguration plan.

7 years ago, when the district proposed closing Woolslair Elementary school, we saw firsthand the negative impact that even the announcement of school closures can have on families and school staff. I witnessed the anxiety it produced in families who were already burdened. I heard from teachers who felt it undermined all the hard work and progress they made. I listened to students who loved their school begin to internalize that their school must be considered "bad." I watched families, who were planning to send their kids to kindergarten there, make alternative plans for their kids' education, and even sometimes move out of the City, which led to further declines in enrollment. These responses were not overblown reactions: the available research shows the real stress and disruption to learning that school transitions create.

**The district needs to acknowledge that, even under the best of circumstances, school closures harm families and communities, and it has a responsibility to treat *even the announcement of school closure plans* very, very carefully and intentionally.**

**Regrettably, the proposed reconfiguration plan fails to do this. As a whole, it's deeply disturbing to us that this plan seems to treat de-segregating our schools, improving academic outcomes for especially our Black and Brown students, and what happens to students with disabilities and English Language Learners, as secondary concerns--or issues that will be explored later, rather than the primary goal of any reconfiguration effort.**

**Unfortunately, we see this lack of concern with the way our neighborhood schools in particular are treated under this plan. Two of our five neighborhood schools are proposed to be closed under this plan, even after the school closure of Fort Pitt School has already impacted some of our families who will, once again, be impacted by new school closures.**

**Arsenal 6-8 is perhaps THE shining example of a school getting results for its most marginalized students: it has gotten the STAR school status for SIX years in a row, which I believe no other school in PPS history (or Allegheny County, for that matter) can claim. Why on Earth would PPS propose to close one of its highest-performing schools, rather than building off of it as one of its strengths? As recently as a year ago, PPS's plans were to try to bring more students IN to Arsenal 6-8 because of the great results the school is getting for its student population, which is mainly low-income students, Black and Brown students, English Language Learners, and students with exceptionalities.**

**Furthermore, this plan's treatment of Woolslair PreK-5 completely reverses promises to the community and progress the school has made. 7 years ago, the School Board demanded that the Woolslair school community create its own plan for how to stem enrollment decline, and we did just that. We took teachers, parents, and students to other schools to review the most exciting trends in local schools, and we used that to create a plan for a STEAM school at Woolslair. This work created the STEAM program across PPS. Woolslair has doubled its enrollment over those years, at the same time that PPS**



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overall continues to lose students. Again, it must be asked: why is the district proposing to throw away one of its primary examples of progress? How can any plan that proposes to close Woolslair again not lead with a sensitive treatment of what will happen to the STEAM program we all fought so hard for?

In its presentation of the plan, the district attempted to draw a contrast to past school closure processes, yet this plan is more drastic and way more rushed than the last time a single school was proposed to be closed. The building conditions and budget problems confronting PPS are the same ones that were around the last time school closures were on the table. The district has had plenty of time to engage communities proactively about the school footprint and how school reconfiguration could meet family and community goals, with the district's commitment to equity as the core guiding principle.

This plan fails to center equity, the needs of our most marginalized students, and the urgent call to desegregate our school system. It fails to honor authentic community and family engagement. It treats as disposable some of the district's best examples of progress, and it treats prior commitments and promises toward reimagining our schools as temporary and conditional. It even fails to meet the budget shortfall that the district has projected! While the budget issues in front of PPS can and should be confronted, this plan is not the way to start the conversation.

Thank you.