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PPS board votes down school closure plan

Summary: *Policy Brief Vol. 24, No. 39*, examined a school consolidation plan put forth by consultants at the request of the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) board. After a year of presentations, community input, revisions, updates and deliberations, the PPS board voted against the finalized plan on Nov. 25. This *Brief* will outline the proposed changes and financial impact for PPS had the plan passed.

Background

In January 2024, the PPS board passed a resolution calling for a facilities utilization plan due to ongoing financial challenges and declining enrollment. The district had functional capacity to serve nearly double its roughly 19,700 students at the time. Following a six-month study, consultants unveiled their recommendations of “opening three new schools, reconfiguring 12 schools and closing 14 schools and 10 facilities, which would reduce the [d]istrict’s footprint from 54 to 42 schools.”

That proposal was immediately met with opposition from some parents, students and board members. After a feasibility study and follow-up report, the board “voted to open the state-required public comment period for the proposed closures” on June 25, 2025. However, “[a]s part of its approval, the board [required] that the Superintendent deliver an Implementation Plan, prior to a board vote on a final plan later this year.” On Oct. 30, the superintendent and district leadership publicly presented the “Future-Ready Facilities Implementation Plan” (Plan) to the board, which ultimately voted against it on Nov. 25.

Policy Brief Vol. 24, No. 39, noted that “[s]chool closures could present potential savings on staff and maintenance costs ... In doing so, PPS also has the opportunity to focus its resources on providing a better educational experience for students.” The Allegheny Institute has long lamented PPS’s poor educational achievement scores despite exceedingly high spending per pupil.

Policy Brief Vol. 25, No. 28, highlighted that “[f]or the 2023-24 achievement exams, PPS ranked 466 (of 610 school districts and charter schools).” Despite this, per pupil spending (total expenditure per average daily membership) ranked 10th highest in the state at

\$33,524, per the most recent data (2023-2024) from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. By comparison, high scoring districts Mt. Lebanon and Peters Township spent only \$21,287 and \$20,114 per pupil, respectively.

So, how would the Plan have addressed these concerns?

School and building closures

The finalized “future-ready facilities plan” included 12 school closures, nine building closures, opening two new schools and 10 grade reconfigurations. The Baxter; Friendship; Fulton; Miller (McKelvy); Schiller; Woolslair and Manchester buildings would have closed after the 2025-2026 school year ended. Morrow and Spring Hill’s buildings would have closed following the end of the 2027-2028 school year once renovations for Northview preK-5 – a previously closed building – concluded. Northview preK-5 and Sci-Tech 6-8 comprised the two “new” schools. Grade reconfigurations would have shifted the (pre)K-5, (pre)K-8, 6-8, 6-12 and 9-12 model to just (pre)K-5, 6-8 and 9-12.

The recommendations on school and building closures were based on multiple factors including community input, enrollment trends, locations, student experience and capacity, age, condition and quality of school buildings. The executive summary of the Plan notes that many of the district’s buildings are over 90 years old and need costly renovations and modernization; declining enrollment has stretched resources thin. Closures therefore would result in savings from capital cost avoidance, maintenance and utilities and an overall better allocation of resources.

The nine building closures would have resulted in \$591,846 in savings annually in utilities and an estimated \$102.3 million in cost avoidance in the district’s seven-year capital plan, though roughly \$48.6 million of that would be reinvested toward building upgrades and renovations. Expeditiously selling the buildings with the proceeds helping to pay for the \$48.6 million in capital developments or existing debts – as required by state law – would be the most financially prudent option. The Plan also proposed opening three new “teaching and learning centers” dedicated to instructional and professional development for staff, though this idea would carry a \$1.9 million one-year pilot cost and an anticipated \$7.6 million annual outlay if fully implemented.

Staffing and instructional changes

Building consolidations also present potential savings by reducing staffing costs and redundancies. The staffing projections included in the Plan showed a budgeted 2,291.5 school-based positions for the 2025-26 school year, which would drop to 2,139 for the 2026-27 school year. This drop is mostly accounted for by vacant or unfilled positions and anticipated retirements and resignations rather than layoffs. Future years anticipated more typical adjustments due to attrition. These “delivery model changes” forecasted savings of roughly \$4 million in 2026, \$8.6 million in 2027 and \$6.3 million annually thereafter.

All preK-5 magnet programs except for Montessori would be phased out and four new neighborhood magnet programs would be introduced at the 6-8 and 9-12 level. These schools would “operate like full magnets by enrolling students from across the city while guaranteeing seats and identical programming to all students who reside in the attendance zone.” The grade level reconfigurations, new feeder patterns and attendance zones sought to promote consistency in pathways and student experience throughout the district.

Curriculum adjustments also intended to maintain and expand course offerings and opportunities, including for English-language development and special education programs. Gifted programs would have shifted from a centralized building to being housed in each student’s home school. As a result of these changes, the district anticipated significantly decreasing daily bus trips (from 986 to 402) to help achieve nearly \$5.6 million in transportation savings.

Next steps

The district’s initial budget proposal included \$736.6 million in expenditures with a \$25.7 million deficit which would have been reduced to \$11.4 million if the Plan were approved. A revised budget presented on Dec. 2 showed \$732.3 million in expenditures with a \$6.3 million deficit thanks to cyber charter reform included in the state budget.

Barring any changes, the district will have to continue relying on its dwindling reserves to cover the operating deficit. Had both the charter reforms and Plan passed, the district likely would have projected a surplus for the 2026 budget. Even then, both still assume a 4 percent millage increase (10.25 to 10.66 mills) while maintaining exorbitant levels of spending per student.

So, while the Plan would not have been a panacea for the district’s many ailments, it would have represented a desperately needed challenge to the unsustainable status quo. One news [article](#) reported that the resolution enacting the Plan could “return to the agenda only if a board member who previously voted against it raises the measure again,” with another [article](#) indicating that at least one director planned to do so but did not say when. The district must also “soon allow families to enter the magnet lottery ... likely [pushing] back any closures to the end of the 2026-2027 school year at the earliest.”

Conclusion

No school consolidation plan will ever have complete buy-in. But whatever path the district takes, it must start making headway on rightsizing the district’s footprint, achieving financial stability and ensuring a quality education for students. Anything less would be an affront to taxpayers, parents and students alike.

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