

Testimony Submitted to Pittsburgh Public Schools Board of Directors

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Education Law Center (ELC) is a legal advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all of Pennsylvania's children have access to a quality public education, in particular the most underserved students: children living in poverty, children of color, children with disabilities, children in the foster and juvenile justice systems, children experiencing homelessness, multilingual learners, LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming students, and students at the intersection of those identities.

Consolidation of Schools: ELC stands today with a broad coalition of community voices urging you to increase transparency and center equity when you consider any future school consolidations or closures. We ask District leaders to engage meaningfully with the community, including by sharing the data used to determine whether consolidations or closures are needed.

The community is asking for transparency. The District could increase this transparency by establishing a robust stakeholder engagement process to establish and share clear criteria that would be used to identify any schools for consolidation or closure. Families, the District's most important stakeholders, are more likely to be open to change if they truly have a say in creating that change.

When thinking about the data used to determine consolidations or closures, the factors considered must be more than facility utilization numbers. The District should not only focus on enrollment numbers and whether a school is underutilized but look at the impact on underserved students, including students with disabilities and multilingual learners, and at the impact of any potential school closures on

predominately Black and brown neighborhoods. Racial equity must be a fundamental component of the decision-making process.

Research from past school closures does demonstrate that consolidating or closing schools without taking appropriate protective measures can have long-term negative impacts on student academic outcomes.¹ We know children in our schools are still facing learning loss due to the pandemic. Any consolidation or closure plan must contain protections against the possibility of additional learning loss, especially for students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and other underserved students.

We recognize that the District must make tough fiscal choices. However, Pittsburgh's neighborhood schools are more than just buildings. They are critical community institutions. We share our partners' concern about the potential impact of school closures on our most underserved students and ask for transparency and inclusivity in the decision-making process. We offer these comments in the spirit of what we know to be a shared commitment to creating an equitable process for all students, families, and community members.

Summary Citations: In addition, we want to comment briefly on revised Policy 212 regarding summary citations.

ELC continues to call for a permanent end to the District's use of summary citations as a school disciplinary practice. We do appreciate revised Policy 212's recognition that summary citations are not issued as a disciplinary measure in response to code of conduct violations. However, we know that the District's past data on summary citations showed that Black students, and Black girls in particular, were charged at a much higher rate than their peers. It is unclear how the revisions to Policy 212 would eliminate these significant racial disparities in the issuance of summary citations.

The District has had a moratorium on summary citations for months now, and the sky has not fallen. We urge the district to eliminate the use of summary citations or issue a revised policy that addresses the documented racial disparities.

¹ Gordon, Molly, et al., May 2018. "School Closings in Chicago: Staff and Student Experiences and Academic Outcomes." University of Chicago Consortium, available at <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/school-closings-chicago-staff-and-student-experiences-and-academic-outcomes>.

Thank you for welcoming the Education Law Center as a collaborator in this work. We remain available as a resource going forward.

Who we are: The Education Law Center (ELC) is a non-profit legal advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all Pennsylvania's children, from birth through twenty-one, have access to a quality public education. For 45 years, ELC has provided legal advice, consultation, and technical assistance to thousands of parents, advocates, and other professionals on issues of public education. Our work focuses on ensuring that the students, families, and communities most impacted are centered in the decision-making process and part of co-constructing solutions.