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Testimony before Philadelphia City Council Education Committee

School Closure Hearing

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Thank you for generously permitting me to present testimony to this esteemed body. It's particularly heartening to testify today given the extraordinary level of interest City Council has shown in the quality of our public schools. While this body has a long and impressive history of focusing on the needs of our school children and school district, this discussion today is especially important. The information and input gathered here, along with the information from the community meetings hosted by the School Reform Commission (SRC), can help the district choose the best possible course of action for our students.

As you know, when the district unveiled its school closure plan it indicated that the closures would reap as much as \$28 million in savings. Since the announcement, many questions have been asked. Are those savings gross or net of the cost of the transfer related costs, are those savings all recurring or will some savings be one time, and are those savings estimates reliable? Given the fiscal issues the district faces, all of these questions are reasonable and need more credible answers than are currently available. But regardless of the answers, the potential for savings is not the best lens through which to evaluate the school closure plan.

I believe there are two significant questions that together with the district, the citizens of this City need to work to answer.

First, will receiving schools be as good at a minimum or ideally better, with respect to the academic offerings, safety and performance than the closing school? Second, how can the City and school district work together to ensure that shuttered buildings quickly become new community assets?

I will focus my remarks on the first question, which is again, will receiving schools be as good as, or better, than the closing school? Where the answer is yes, and where a feasible transfer plan can be put in place, we should proceed this year.

Today, the district enrolls about 154,000 students. These students are in 291 school buildings that together have the capacity to handle approximately 50,000 more students than are currently enrolled. Obviously, the drop in district enrollment is, in part, due to students transferring to charter schools. Since 2000, charter enrollment has grown by 31,617 students. However, not all of those students were necessarily transfers from school district buildings. In the same period parochial school enrollment dropped by 19,408 students and some or many of those students account for the rising charter enrollment.

It's important to recognize the other major factor contributing to declining student enrollment. The school district infrastructure was built to meet the needs of a City with 2 million residents. But in 1980 the City's population began to dip. Today we have only slightly more than 1.5 million residents.

As a result, since the year 2000, 33,744 fewer students are enrolled in any sort of school, traditional public school, a charter public school or a parochial school in Philadelphia. The rise in charter schools and our declining population is reason enough for us to rethink how many public school buildings the district should continue to operate.

While I share the majority of Council's desire to have more time to digest the proposed closure plan, we should not continue to send any students to under-enrolled, dangerous buildings that have poor academic performance for another year. Instead, if the school district can show that it's prepared to make the transfers to new buildings work for students, every student, I believe we should support those closings and rally behind the district to make that happen, post haste.

For this reason, I would like to focus the balance of my testimony on what Public Citizens for Children and Youth finds to be the essential elements of a school closure plan that will ensure every student affected is better off.

We start from the threshold expectation that from the student perspective, the new school must offer, at a minimum as good as, and ideally, a better learning environment than the closed school. The objective elements that will contribute to meeting this expectation are: **Grade Span** –We recommend that to the extent possible no new or expanded middle schools are created except in cases where middle schools are high performing. Research shows that students do better in K-8 schools. In fact, this plan increases the number of students enrolled in schools offering kindergarten through eighth grade.

However, in instances where there is no choice but to expand or create a new middle school, the district must put strategies in place to ensure that the school is successful.

Ensure High School Options – Unfortunately, the voluntary transfer deadline pre-dated the release of the school closure list. This situation most directly affects high school students. We strongly recommend that the district extend the deadline for voluntary transfers for students from closing schools who wish to attend a school other than the one to which they were reassigned. In this process, the district must ensure that every seat in high-performing schools is occupied in the fall.

Student Supports and Enrichment – Some of the school buildings that are closing have unique or highly developed student supports. Our research finds that 14 buildings have Head Start classrooms where some students naturally transitioned into the elementary school classes and 3 high schools have Head Start sites that offer pre-k classes for the children of parenting teens attending those schools. Some of the buildings have needed and inspired after-school and in-school enrichment resources. Again, by way of example, 14 buildings have special visiting artists working with school faculty on integrating arts education into the school via PCCY’s Picasso project. These special partnerships should be maintained to ensure that students continue to benefit from these partnerships. Fourteen of the closing school buildings have critical services for students with behavioral health needs.

The district should ensure that these student support programs follow students to the receiving schools. To demonstrate that these student supports remain in place, the district should release a project management plan that demonstrates how resources and supports will accompany students to receiving schools, on a school-by-school basis. Included in this plan should also be explicit reference to the continuity of services for students who need special education supports, homeless student supports, and English language learners.

Class Size – The district should ensure that no student is transferred to a school where large class size will negatively impact their academic outcomes. While we recognize the financial implications associated with reducing class size, we believe that this is an investment that will pay for itself in future. Specifically, K-3 students should be transferred to classes with approximately eighteen or fewer students. We make this recommendation based on research that demonstrates that smaller classes in grades K-3 boosts student achievement.ⁱ

Maintain Community Partnerships – In many of the closing schools, students have benefited from strong partnerships with youth-serving organizations. These relationships should be maintained as buildings close.

To that end, we suggest that the district enlist these youth-serving organizations as partners before, during, and after the transition. In addition, we specifically recommend that partnership agreements in the closing schools be deemed approved in the receiving schools so critical services can be provided without interruption.

Clearly school closings can disrupt established relationships between school personnel and students, a critical component of school climate. Research shows that students from the closing school are often left with fewer familiar faces to provide the social and emotional supports to adjust to the challenges of their new school.ⁱⁱ For example, students have reported having weaker relationships with their new teachers, different academic norms and expectations and less support available to them in their new school.ⁱⁱⁱ For this reason we believe that the district, the City and our civic/business leadership should work together to increase enrichment activities in receiving schools.

School Improvement Bridge Program – Specifically, we suggest these resources support a School Improvement Bridge Program starting in June with academic and recreational activities that bring students together in the last two weeks of the current school year and throughout the summer to build bonds, break down distrust and ready all students for the new student body of the next school year.

Staff Development for All School Building Personnel – We need to strategically enlist experts and trainers to help principals, teachers and non-teaching school building staff to employ creative instructional strategies, approaches to discipline, and safety protocols throughout the spring, summer, and fall that help integrate new students and create a cohesive and positive school climate.

Summer and After School Programs – The district must offer sufficient, regular team-building or enrichment opportunities throughout the summer and into the next school year after school so that every student has the opportunity to engage in activities with fellow students to build new school affiliation and camaraderie.

Obviously, school closings present safety concerns because neighborhood rivalries and the presence of new students can lead to altercations in school and during commutes to and from school. Fourteen of the schools listed for closing are among the district's most dangerous.

At a minimum, we believe the following steps should be taken to ensure student safety both in school and while traveling to and from school:

Transportation Plans – The district must create a coordinated transportation plan with SEPTA, the Police Department, school police and community groups aimed at keeping children safe going to and from school. Part of making this strategy successful may require, **staggering opening and closing times** at nearby schools where safety problems are anticipated.

Further, the district must provide K-8 students with transportation if their new school is significantly farther than their current school or where the students are required to walk on hazardous routes or cross major city streets.

Safe Corridors – The district together with the City and community partners must mobilize volunteers to monitor heavily traveled routes or hot spots in particular neighborhoods.

Community Involvement to Promote Calm – This City is home to expert behavioral health staff who are eager to work with community groups, the district, school personnel, parents and students to build the skills needed to help students navigate this change without violence and minimize turf-related conflict.

We believe that these basic inputs are essential to making this transition work for students. To implement the strategy, we suggest the district establish an internal structure and organizational processes, release a credible timeline, and create a feedback loop to support transition efforts.

At a minimum we believe the following elements are essential:

Transition Coordinator – The district needs to designate a seasoned leader with experience both as a principal and a central office administrator to work as a Transition Coordinator. The Transition Coordinator should serve as the single point of contact who is responsible for overseeing the transitions in each school. In addition, the Transition Coordinator must mobilize all the resources in the district to ensure they are at the disposal of students, families, and in closing and receiving schools.

Learn from the Lessons of School Closings in 2012 – Charge the Transition Coordinator with immediately collecting and then disseminating lessons learned from last year's school closings. District staff and parents can benefit from learning about effective strategies for welcoming and integrating students, families, community stakeholders, new teachers and support staff.

Transition Collaborative – Here we use the word collaborative, but what we really mean is a temporary "Transition Region". We've used the word collaborative so players involved understand that they each have a role in the transition success. The district should charge the Transition Coordinator with facilitating regular meetings and communication between and among Collaborative members, which at a

minium, should include school building leaders at the closing and receiving schools, key external providers involved in the closing and receiving schools, and district administrative staff.

The Collaborative can ensure, for example, that information and best practices are shared for staff and student integration, and student records are smoothly transitioned in time for the school year to begin.

Designate a Transition Representative – Each closing and receiving building should have one lead Transition Representative who is in regular communication with the Transition Coordinator to serve with the principal on the Collaborative. The Transition Representative should also serve as a point of contact for parent groups in the receiving school.

Establish and Publish a Transition Timeline – To minimize conflict and ease the transition, parents, students and staff need a clear understanding of all deadlines affecting them and the district operations between now and the start of the 2013-14 academic year including:

- When all student transfer policies will be released
- When student transfer applications must be submitted
- When students will be informed of acceptance to the new school
- When new school orientation will occur for students
- When faculty must submit requests for transfers
- When faculty transfers will be accepted and announced
- When new faculty orientation will occur
- When new parent orientations will occur

Increase Access to Regular and Accurate Information for Parents – The district should launch a website and release printed materials that explain the facts and processes parents and teachers need to know to successfully enroll in the schools they've selected. In addition, the district should hold informational meetings for each closed school to review all timelines and processes with parents.

Publish and Implement a “Commitment to Parents and Students” – The district can help ensure its staff and parents are clear about the desired outcomes of the school closure process by outlining the district's expectations, commitments and assurances of the school improvement process with respect to the following items:

- The desired educational outcomes
- The continuity of sports, arts and other enrichment activities for students
- The availability of student support services and methods for ensuring services received in the closed schools follow the student
- The plans for transportation and safety and student records transfer
- The arrangements for introducing new students to current students in the receiving schools
- The plans for helping parents learn about their new schools and meeting school building leaders and teachers
- The expectations of receiving school leaders and how their performance will be evaluated
- The mechanisms for addressing parental concerns in a consistent and timely manner
- The process for identifying student supports to help students who are struggling with the transition
- Information about what parents and students can do help with the transition

Host Open House Events – The district and local community organizations must join together to host several open houses in the receiving schools beginning in the spring through the summer to the fall opening of school to foster relationships and greet new students and colleagues.

Personnel Transfers – The district should ensure that all positions created to accommodate incoming students at the receiving schools are filled by May 1 so that instructional and support staff can meet their counterparts before the end of the school year and plan for a productive 2013-14 school year.

It is our hope that a year from now we will be able to look back on the current school closing controversies and see that the “crisis” resulted in enhanced opportunities for the tens of thousands of affected students. For this reason, PCCY is releasing a “Checklist for Parents Affected by School Closures” with hopes that they can help push for the adoption of our suggested recommendations.

Finally, PCCY suggests that where the district working in consort with City agencies and other strong organizations in this City cannot demonstrate that a reasonable and in-depth plan is in place to deliver an as good as, or a better, school for each child affected by the closure, those school closings should be delayed so that the right supports can be put in place.

In closing, I will echo the concerns raised by many others who have testified about the facts used to choose which buildings will close and which will receive new students. I am hopeful that the SRC will recognize that we have a terrific opportunity to build a new public understanding and commitment to high achievement by “doing this school closure thing right.” The level of interest and concern about our schools, evidenced by the Council vote a week or so ago, this hearing, and the public response to the district’s proposed closure plan can be turned into the momentum we need to help turn around this big ship. For this reason, I urge the SRC to proceed where it believes the district is ready, and where a clear and convincing case can be made that the receiving building offers a safer and academically rewarding learning environment that is as good as, or better than, what is currently in place in the closing building. Where that is the case, PCCY will be on board and I believe that most of my fellow Philadelphians share that view.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

ⁱ Finn, J. (2002) Class Reduction in Grades K-3. State University of New York at Buffalo, pgs. 20-24.

ⁱⁱ Sunderman, G., & Payne, A. (2009). *Does Closing Schools Cause Educational Harm? A Review of the Research*. The Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, pgs. 6-9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.