

Virtual Agora Project Report:
**Deliberated Views Regarding School Consolidation
and Educational Improvements in Pittsburgh**

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Executive Summary

BACKGROUND¹

- This project brought a representative sample of 568 Pittsburgh city residents to Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) to participate in a day-long learning and discussion experience concerning school consolidation and educational improvements in Pittsburgh city schools.
- The project was funded by the National Science Foundation as a social science research project and conceived and executed by CMU's Institute for the Study of Information Technology and Society and the Center for the Advancement of Applied Ethics.
- All participants were given two 40 minute periods to examine information about five policies: closing schools in the future generally, eliminating 4500 seats over three years specifically, eliminating middle schools by going to a K-8 system, adding small learning communities to the high schools, and choice of schools within larger geographical regions.
- Two-thirds of participants deliberated in groups of 12 or fewer about the policy issues. One-third were in a no-discussion control group for purposes of social science research.

FINAL POLICY VIEWS AND THE RATIONALES BEHIND THEM

- Four of the five policies examined received support from strong majorities of participants after their "day of deliberation" (counting both discussants and no-discussion contemplators). These four policies were: closing schools, eliminating 4500 seats, eliminating middle schools, and adding small learning communities to the high schools. Participants' views were mixed on regional choice.

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- According to project discussion facilitators (Appendix C), participants had several concerns about regional choice. One concern was equity for students whose parents were less involved. Another was concern over accentuating racial inequality. Some participants had difficulty conceiving of regional choice as separate from magnet school type programs.
- According to project discussion facilitators, K-8 schools (eliminating middle schools), received overwhelming support because participants saw this policy as something that retained the advantages of neighborhood schools such as: being relatively nearby, keeping siblings together, and making meetings easier for parents to attend.
- Closing schools and eliminating 4500 seats achieved substantial majority support in part because many participants put considerable weight on two considerations: that keeping underused schools open wastes money and, to a lesser extent, that closing schools would be a good time to institute educational reforms.
- Nevertheless, 92% percent of participants indicated that they did have some concerns about closing schools. The most important of these were: closing schools may not save as much money as proposed, that it is important to keep schools in the neighborhoods, and that closing schools does not address educational concerns.
- Few people indicated the concern that their child might be affected significantly influenced their policy attitudes. Nor was having or expecting to have a child in the public schools of concern.

POLICY VIEW CHANGE

- The project found strong opinion change from before participants learned about and discussed the policies to after. There were substantial increases in agreement regarding closing schools, eliminating 4500 seats, and eliminating middle schools. There was a substantial decrease in support for the regional choice plan, and a very small movement against small learning communities primarily by people who were undecided.
- Greater factual knowledge had significant and substantial effects in favor of closing schools, eliminating 4500 seats, and moving to a K-8 system. Knowledge also turned people against regional choice.
- Discussion did shift mean opinion on the issues, but the stronger effect seems to be due simply to reading information about the policies. Nevertheless, the prospect of discussing with others served a crucial motivating role without which participation would likely have been appreciably lower.

POSSIBLE EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS

- The strongest differences of opinion among participants were by income. Persons from households making less than \$20,000 per year were opposed to eliminating 4500 seats, did not have a majority in favor of closing schools, and supported regional choice, in contrast to the full sample.

- Participant and facilitator comments indicate a perception that lower-income groups have borne the brunt of school closings in the past. They also indicate that low income people may have greater difficulty being involved in more distant schools because of less access to transportation and child care.
- Even among people who were middle-class or upper class, however, higher income indicates greater support for school closings and eliminating 4500 seats. This support appears to come from considerations not covered by the study.
- African-Americans generally supported the same policies as non-African-Americans, though their support for closing schools, eliminating 4500 seats, and eliminating middle schools was not as strong. Also, the regional choice plan won majority support among African-American participants.

The Virtual Agora Project Deliberation: Participants, Methods, Procedures, and Measures

PARTICIPANTS

Knowledge Networks, an outside firm noted for its sampling work on academic deliberation projects, conducted the recruitment for this study. Of a sample of 6,935 Pittsburgh city residents (defined by zip code area) who could be reached via random digit dialing (RDD), 22% agreed to participate in this research and took a phone survey. Sampling differed from the typical methodology on other substantial deliberation projects conducted by Knowledge Networks in that it did not utilize quota sampling to make demographic statistics more representative of the population as a whole. Thus, the sample accurately reflects who would come to this deliberation without demographic oversampling. This has two advantages. First, the sample better reflects a somewhat more politically engaged public—people who are concerned about the community and who are likely to vote. Also, although quota sampling may result in demographics matching the population in certain crude categories, those who come to a deliberation after extensive oversampling of their demographic are most likely not typical of their demographic, yielding misleading results.

Of recruits who agreed to participate, 37% or 568 people showed for the Phase 1 on-campus deliberation. A modest response rate was expected because recruits were asked to participate in a series of online deliberations that would take most participants eight-months to complete and which they could join only by coming to an initial on-campus, all-day deliberation. The final participation percentages are not, however, incomparable to that of another substantial long-term deliberation study, Vincent Price's Electronic Dialogue Project at the Annenberg School of Communication (Price and Cappella 2002; Price and David 2005). Ultimately, the response rates are modest. Comfort can be drawn from several considerations: a fair similarity to population demographics, the fact that the sample represents people who might be expected to participate in longer-term deliberations, and the objective of this research which is experimental and focused on psychological processes that should be universal.

Despite a strict RDD sample and modest response rate, the participants in the Virtual Agora Project reasonably matched the Pittsburgh city population on most demographic criteria. The sample was 77% Caucasian and 18% African-American, compared with CPS population benchmarks for the relevant zip codes of 75% and 20%, respectively. Fifty-six percent of the sample was female, compared with 53% for the population. Twelve percent of the sample was 18-29 years old, 22% 30-44 years old, 26% 45-59, and 27% 60+. This compares with population values of 26%, 20%, 26%, and 27%. The elderly and thirty-somethings are accurately represented, the young are underrepresented, while mid-life adults are overrepresented. Average age, however, is the same as for the population. Perhaps the greatest departure from population values is for education, which, as expected, is greater than for the population. Median education is "Some College" for both the sample and the population. Lower educational categories,

however, are underrepresented, with 10% of the sample having less than a high school education and 14% having just a high school education, compared with 16% and 31% for the population. Nevertheless, the sample does contain the full range of educational levels and statistical reweighting can be used to determine what the results might be if the sample were more precisely like the public.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

Knowledge Networks obtained phone numbers for households in the City of Pittsburgh from a random digit dial (RDD) sample. Where numbers appeared in a reverse directory, the household was sent an advance letter on Carnegie Mellon University stationery describing the study and indicating that the household would be contacted shortly. A Knowledge Networks phone center called households in the RDD sample and requested the household member with the most recent birth date. Both the letter and the call center indicated that in exchange for participation in the study, participants would have a four out of five chance of receiving a Windows computer and eight months of ISP service. The remainder would receive \$100. Those who received a computer would be expected to participate in a longer-term online deliberation from home that would require six hours of discussion over eight months. People who agreed to participate were given a short phone-based survey of their demographics and policy attitudes, and they were scheduled for a one-day, eight hour on-campus deliberation. Participants were asked to come to a randomly-chosen day from the deliberation schedule, which spanned three weeks in July, including many weekends and weekdays.

The on-campus deliberations were held with up to 60 participants daily. After informed consent and a brief training session, participants took a web-based pre-survey. Next, they were given a 40 minute "library session" to learn more about four policy topics related to school consolidation in Pittsburgh, a break, 90 minutes for "deliberation" (face-to-face, online, or individual contemplation, depending on research condition), and lunch. The library session, break, and deliberation (same condition as before) were repeated in the afternoon, and this was followed by the second survey. The on-campus experiment is the focus of this report.

MEASURES

Below is the actual script for the portion of the phone survey concerning school consolidation policy views. Participants encountered these questions a second time, in form slightly adapted to a Web-based survey, in the survey at the end of each participant's day of deliberation. Knowledge Networks succeeded in phone-interviewing 463 of the 568 study participants before their deliberation day. Those who were phone surveyed before deliberation do not differ systematically from those who were not.

Script for phone survey with variable names in brackets:

Here are a few questions about what you currently think regarding school consolidation. We realize some folks won't have any strong opinions on these or enough information to decide yet. Please try to answer as best as you can.

I'm going to read some statements about what policies should be adopted, and I need to find out how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement. I'd like you to give me a number from 0 to 6, where 0 means "strongly disagree" and 6 means "strongly agree." 3 means "neither agree nor disagree" and is the same as "no opinion." You can also answer with in-between numbers like 1, 2, 4 or 5 to indicate in-between positions.

[Close Schools] How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: "In coming years, the Pittsburgh Public School District should close schools in addition to the ones <to be> closed this year." Please give me a number from 0 to 6, where 0 is strongly disagree, 3 is neither, and 6 is strongly agree.

How sure are you about your answer? Could you give me a number from 1 to 5 where 1 is 'not sure at all', 3 is 'moderately sure', and 5 is 'very sure'?

[Elim 4500 Seats] How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: "Besides the schools <to be> closed this year, the Pittsburgh Public School District should close additional schools to eliminate four thousand five hundred seats in the next three years." Please give me a number from 0 to 6, where 0 is strongly disagree, 3 is neither agree nor disagree, and 6 is strongly agree.

[Elim Middle Schools] How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: "The Pittsburgh Public School District should convert to a K-8 system, removing middle schools." Please give me a number between 0 and 6 (repeat details if needed).

How sure are you about your answer? Could you give me a number from 1 to 5 where 1 is 'not sure at all', 3 is moderately sure, and 5 is 'very sure'?

[Small Learning Commun.] How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: "The Pittsburgh Public School District should put in place small learning communities in the high schools?" Please give me a number from 0 to 6, where 0 is strongly disagree, 3 is neither, and 6 is strongly agree.

[Regional Choice Plan] Finally, how strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: "The Pittsburgh Public School District should institute a regional choice plan, allowing open enrollment in various regions of Pittsburgh? Please give me a number between 0 and 6 (repeat details if needed).

How sure are you about your answer? Could you give me a number from 1 to 5 where 1 is 'not sure at all', 3 is moderately sure, and 5 is 'very sure'?

How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: "I approve of the way the political system overall has been handling its job lately." Please give me a number from 0 to 6, where 0 is strongly disagree, 3 is neither, and 6 is strongly agree.

And, how about this statement: "I approve of the way the Mayor Tom Murphy has been handling his job lately." Please give me a number from 0 to 6, where 0 is strongly disagree, 3 is neither, and 6 is strongly agree.

And, finally, this statement: "I approve of the way the Pittsburgh School Board has been handling its job lately." Please give me a number from 0 to 6.

Post-Deliberation Day Survey

Even if you are in favor of closing more public schools, you may have some worries about closing schools. Similarly, even if you are opposed to closing schools, you may nevertheless have some reasons in favor of closing schools. The next four questions are about worries and reasons you might have, regardless of your position on the issues.

What are your worries about closing schools in the Pittsburgh Public School District? (Check all that apply.)

What is your **one main worry** about closing schools in the Pittsburgh Public School District?

If you answered "other", please specify below:

How strong is this worry?

What are your reasons for wanting to close schools in the Pittsburgh Public School District? (Check all that apply.)

What is your **one main reason** for wanting to close schools in the Pittsburgh Public School District?

How strong is this reason?

Findings

POLICY OPINIONS AND CHANGE IN POLICY OPINIONS

Table 1, Column 2 ("Post-Deliberation Day Opinion; N=559) shows policy opinions after the day of deliberation for the full sample. On four of five issues, participants have substantial majorities in favor of the proposed policies. They are in favor of closing more schools in addition to the ones that were to be closed by School Board decisions made in 2004, eliminating 4500 seats over three years, eliminating middle schools, and adding small learning communities. The option of eliminating middle schools and thereby going to a K-8 system had overwhelming support. Discussion facilitator #2 (see Appendix C) commented that this option was viewed as a way to preserve something like neighborhood schools, being relatively nearby, keeping siblings together, and making meetings easier for parents to attend. Participants were divided on the issue of regional choice, which facilitator #3 indicates raised concerns about equity and predictability. Equity considerations raised were the possibility of accentuated racial inequality and inequality between students with involved and uninvolved parents. Participants were also concerned about uncertainty because it would not be known in advance which schools would become underutilized or overcrowded.

Table 1, Column 3 shows the outcome of a statistical reweighting of the opinion meant to better reflect the demographics of Pittsburgh city. Participants in this deliberation were better educated than the Pittsburgh city population as a whole, and the sample had fewer people in the youngest age category (18-29). Because the proportion of the Pittsburgh population in combinations of demographic categories is known, it is possible to give a heavier weight to participants who represent demographic combinations that are rarer in the sample than in the population. In essence, this means that these people will "speak" for others like themselves who did not come to the deliberation. This reweighting is not perfect because it may be that those who came to the deliberation do not perfectly reflect the views of those demographically like themselves who did not. Nevertheless, looking at Column 3 shows that even after reweighting, people continue to support the same policies as in the unweighted opinions in Column 2. The first four policies continue to support substantial majority support after the day of deliberation. Support does weaken by 7% for closing schools and 4% for eliminating 4500 seats. Weaker support does hint that the less educated or those in the younger age group are less supportive of these policies. This will be further examined in a later section.

Table 1: Policy Opinions After Day of Deliberation for Full Sample

Policy Issue	Post-Deliberation Day Opinion; N=559	Post-Deliberation Day Opinions Weighted to Better Reflect Pittsburgh Demographics
Close Schools	69% Yes 11% Don't Know 21% No	62% Yes 14% DK 25% No
Eliminate 4500 Seats	62% Yes 11% DK 27% No	58% Yes 11% DK 31% No
Eliminate Middle Schools	81% Yes 6% DK 13% No	80% Yes 8% DK 12% No
Add Small Learning Communities	69% Yes 12% DK 19% No	66% Yes 15% DK 19% No
Regional Choice Plan	44% Yes 14% DK 42% No	48% Yes 15% DK 37% No

Notes: Each row reflects 559 respondents who answered the post- deliberation day survey.

I would like to next examine how opinions changed over the course of the day of deliberation. Before doing so, however, Table 1 will be helpful in clarifying how representative the people are whose opinion change was measured. Knowledge Networks succeeded in phone-interviewing only 463 of the 568 study participants before they came to their on-campus day of deliberation. This raises the question of whether there were any systematic differences between those whose opinions were captured in the phone survey and those who were not. Table 1 Column 2 can be compared with Table 2 Column 3 ("Post-Deliberation Day Opinion") to see if there is much difference between the full sample and the portion of the sample that was surveyed both before and after the day of deliberation. Indeed, there is practically no difference between these columns. Statistical analysis also shows that those who were phone surveyed before deliberation do not have significantly different post-deliberation opinions from those who were not phone surveyed. Also, no significant differences were found in demographics, including age, gender, ethnicity, or education. Because these groups do not differ systematically, it is reasonable to assume that an examination of the 463 people for whom we have both pre- and post- deliberation policy opinion data will accurately represent what we would have found had all participants been successfully interviewed by phone.

Table 2 shows, for the five policy opinions that were topics of discussion, what the pre- and post-deliberation day positions of participants were. There were dramatic changes in participant opinions on all but one of the topics of discussion. For example, the number of choices in favor of closing schools rose from 36% prior to the deliberation to 69% at the end of that day.

Eliminating 4500 seats over three years and eliminating middle schools showed even more dramatic changes. In essence, participants developed powerful majorities in favor of changes about which they were either divided or in opposition prior to the deliberation day. Interestingly, in the case of a plan to allow parents to place their children through open enrollment in a larger region of Pittsburgh, parents were initially in favor of the plan but moved against it after due consideration. As for adding small learning communities, there was a small movement from the "Don't Know" category to a "No" response, though there was essentially no change in the number of "Yes" votes. The discussion facilitators (Appendix C) indicate that, of the discussion topics, participants had the most difficulty understanding what small learning communities are. Two interpretations participants suggested were learning communities as "magnet-like" programs within high schools and as programs to retain identities. The latter possibility was seen as harmful and divisive. Facilitator #4 (Appendix C) also reports that many participants understood regional choice as magnet schools. For Regional Choice, there was a significant decrease in approval after due consideration, which is unsurprising given the participant remarks described earlier. The percentage of "Don't Know" responses decreased for every policy issue from pre- to post- discussion opinion, indicating people felt more confident in their views.

Table 2: Opinion Change During Day of Deliberation

Policy Issue	Pre-Deliberation Day Opinion	Post-Deliberation Day Opinion	Mean Difference on 7-Point Scale
Close Schools	36% Yes 29% Don't Know 36% No	69% Yes 11% DK 20% No	1.18***
Eliminate 4500 Seats	23% Yes 36% DK 41% No	62% Yes 11% DK 27% No	1.18***
Eliminate Middle Schools	39% Yes 25% DK 36% No	81% Yes 6% DK 13% No	1.63***
Add Small Learning Communities	70% Yes 24% DK 6% No	71% Yes 12% DK 17% No	-.34**
Regional Choice Plan	65% Yes 22% DK 13% No	42% Yes 15% DK 42% No	-1.19***

Notes: Each row reflects between 451 and 455 respondents who answered both the phone survey and post-deliberation day survey. Participants gave their policy views by providing a whole number between 0 and 6. They were told a 0 meant "strongly disagree," a 3 meant "neither agree nor disagree", and a 6 meant "strongly agree". They were also told that their response would be coded as a Yes if it was above 3 and as a No if it was below. The 'Yes,' 'DK,' and 'No' options in the table represent, respectively, answers that were below 3, at 3, and above 3. The mean difference value shows the mean change from pre- to post- opinions on the 0 to 6 scale.

*** means that the mean difference has a probability of occurring by random chance of .001 or less. ** means a probability of less than or equal to .01.

Table 2 does not clarify whether there was greater change in attitudes for people who discussed the issues than for the control group that did not, and also whether the attitude change for those who discussed was in the same direction as those who did not. Table 2 shows pre- and post- policy attitudes for all participants in the study for which Knowledge Networks was able to obtain a pre-deliberation day policy opinion, including both those who discussed the issues and those who did not. Both groups had time during the deliberation day to study information about the policy issues. For the first two policy issues of Table 2, analysis shows that face-to-face groups do have significantly higher attitude change than those who did not discuss the issues. The change is a third and a half the size of change in the control "read and think only" experimental group, and the change is in the same direction as for the control group. Indications in this data, then, are that much, though not all, of the policy view changes are the result of the information participants read during the deliberation day.

Discussion did prove important in two respects. First, it served an important motivating role. Participants were not told prior to their deliberation day whether they would be in the discussion or the non-discussion control condition. Indications are that appreciably fewer people would have participated in this study had they been told that their day would consist of reading and thinking on their own. Interactions with participants indicate that many were disappointed to find themselves in the no-discussion condition. Some sought to listen in to conversations other groups were having (we sought to reduce the possibility of this happening), and a few control participants tried to talk about the topic with project personnel. Also, participants' motivation to continue participating in discussions in Phase 2 of the project was significantly higher for those in the face-to-face discussion condition.

Second, discussion did exercise a powerful effect on opinion, with people's opinions generally moving a substantial distance in the direction of the average post-deliberation opinion of other people in their discussion group. This did not, however, result in mean opinion change in three of the five policy views because the groups' mean attitudes did not move systematically in one direction. Deliberation in these three groups brought people appreciably closer to each other's views but did not affect mean views across groups.

One interesting analysis sought to determine the effect of factual knowledge of the policies on final policy views. Factual knowledge was measured with a quiz at the end of the day of deliberation. Controlling for demographics, greater factual knowledge has significant and substantial effects in favor of the first three policies in Table 2 and against the fifth policy.

FINAL POLICY ATTITUDES IN DISADVANTAGED DEMOGRAPHIC SUBGROUPS:

POSSIBLE FAIRNESS CONSIDERATIONS

Tables 1 and 2 report results for all demographic groups in the sample. Average opinions may fail to reveal attitude differences among population subgroups such as African-Americans, the less wealthy, or the less educated that may matter for fairness and equity. For example, in a pilot test of this research, one point participants made was that people without cars, generally lower-income people, would have difficulty being involved in their children's schools if their neighborhood school was closed. Also, according to Facilitator #3 (Appendix C), discussion participants mentioned that some people would have difficulty obtaining enough child care to be active in distant schools. The facilitator also reports that participants perceived that past school closings have targeted African-American districts most heavily. Facilitator #4 (Appendix C) points out that many participants felt that while African-American districts were targeted that the real focus was closing schools based on class, not race. Demographic differences deserve examination.

Analyses² indicate that income, education, and being African-American significantly affect post-deliberation day policy opinions. In particular, lower income participants are substantially less likely to support closing schools or eliminating 4500 seats. This is not simply a matter of not having a car because income continues to have an effect even looking exclusively at people with incomes above \$30,000, with higher incomes showing more support for closing schools or eliminating 4500 seats. Being African-American increases support for the Regional Choice Plan and decreases support for eliminating middle schools. Being less educated has a variety of small but significant effects, but these effects appear to be largely an illusion. Less educated participants may have had greater difficulty absorbing the facts regarding the policy issues and for that reason came to different policy conclusions. This was tested by controlling for a measure of post-deliberation day decision knowledge (a facts quiz), which eliminated most of the effects of education.

² Multivariate ordinary least squares regression, cluster-robust standard errors with discussion groups taken as clusters. Each analysis includes all demographics—kids in public school, gender, African-American, age, education, and income.

Table 3: Post-Deliberation Day Policy Opinions in All Demographic Groups and in Disadvantaged Demographic Subgroups

Policy Issue	Opinions; Full Sample, N=559	Opinions; Income<\$20,000; N=94	Opinions; African-Americans; N=102
Close Schools	69% Yes 11% Don't Know 21% No	47% Yes 16% DK 37% No	59% Yes 13% DK 28% No
Eliminate 4500 Seats	62% Yes 11% DK 27% No	39% Yes 18% DK 43% No	53% Yes 13% DK 34% No
Eliminate Middle Schools	81% Yes 6% DK 13% No	76% Yes 6% DK 18% No	70% Yes 7% DK 24% No
Add Small Learning Communities	69% Yes 12% DK 19% No	67% Yes 14% DK 19% No	63% Yes 14% DK 24% No
Regional Choice Plan	44% Yes 14% DK 42% No	51% Yes 18% DK 31% No	55% Yes 15% DK 30% No

Table 3 shows opinion break downs for all demographic groups and for lower income people and African-Americans. Column 2 of Table 3 shows all demographic groups for comparison purposes and is the same as Table 1 Column 2. Column 3 of Table 3 examines the opinions of people with less than \$20,000 a year in income. These opinions differ notably from the full sample for three of the policy issues. Lower income people do not show clear majorities in favor of closing schools or eliminating 4500 seats. A plurality of lower-income people still favor closing schools, but a plurality also favors not eliminating 4500 seats. Also, a majority favor regional choice while the full sample is divided on the issue. African-Americans, whose opinions are depicted in Column 4, share the same majority opinions as the full sample on four issues. On the issue of regional choice, however, African-Americans show a majority in favor of choice while the full sample is divided on this issue. Also, African-Americans show markedly lower degrees of consensus on three issues. For example, 70% of African-Americans are in favor of eliminating middle schools, relative to the 81% in favor in the full sample.

PARTICIPANTS' REASONS REGARDING SCHOOL CLOSINGS

Participants were given multiple opportunities to clarify why they made the decisions they made. Here, I will examine a section of their final survey that allowed them to select among a multitude of alternative reasons for their decision regarding school closings and, in one case, to add their own reasons if the depicted alternatives were inadequate to capture their views. Another opportunity participants had to voice their reasons was in general open-ended comments at the end of the final day of deliberation survey. These are depicted in Appendix B.

Table 4: Portion of All Participants Citing Various Reasons For and Against Closing Schools and the Effects of These Reasons on Closing Schools and Eliminating 4500 Seats

Reasons Against Closing	Percent of All Participants Citing This Reason	Unique Effect on Closing Schools	Unique Effect on Eliminating 4500 Seats
Closing schools may not save as much money as proposed	61%	-.38*	-.51***
It is important to keep schools in the neighborhoods	48%	-.43*	-.34*
I have no reasons in favor of closing schools	14%	-1.59***	-1.23***
My child may be affected	15%	.05	-.54*
Closing schools does not address educational concerns	69%	.01	-.14
The mechanism to close schools is unclear or unfair	49%	-.12	-.19
Decreased land value in my neighborhood	29%	-.23	-.001
Reasons For Closing			
School district is wasting money keeping underused schools open	65%	.99***	1.01***
Closing schools could be a great time to institute educational reforms	56%	.35**	.39*
I have no worry about closing public schools	8%	.55*	.51†
Some schools are in disrepair, so it'd be better to send kids to newer schools	28%	-.27	-.09
Student safety	13%	-.18	-.30
R ² ; s.e.; N		.41; 1.46; 559	.35; 1.56; 559

Notes: Columns four and five display unstandardized multivariate ordinary least squares coefficients (all on 7-pt scales). Results here understate the effect of "Closing schools does not address educational concerns." (see text two paragraphs below)

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; † p<.10; all p-values are two-sided and with discussion-group robust standard errors. p values may be divided in half because most coefficients fit directional hypotheses.

In the survey section on reasons to be in favor or against school closings, participants were initially asked to check all considerations in a list of reasons that helped inform their decisions. They selected from the list of reasons presented in Table 4. Reasons are displayed in two groups: reasons against closing and reasons for closing. Within each group, reasons are displayed in order of importance, which is a combination of the percentage of participants checking a given reason (not mutually exclusive checks) and the size of the effect that reason has on two policy views: closing schools in general and eliminating 4500 seats over three years specifically. The percent of participants appears in Column 2 of Table 4. Reasons against closing received more checks than reasons for closing, however, not all actually have a significant impact on decisions, as indicated by the stars in column three and four. More stars indicate greater certainty that the impact is real, though even one star is considered solid evidence. Considerations without stars can be ignored as ineffective, with one exception to be discussed below. Also, by and large the reasons for closing have a stronger impact, as indicated by summing the starred numbers in columns 3 and 4, than do reasons against closing. Fear that the school district is wasting money keeping underused schools open plays a potent role in people's final decisions both because of large "unique effects" and the fact that 65% of participants select these considerations. The unique effect of .99 indicates that selecting the "wasting money" option moves a participant's final opinion on closing schools up by .99 points on the 7-point scale on which closing schools opinions were measured. An exception to the general pattern of stronger effects for reasons for closing is that having no reasons in favor of closing schools has outsized effects against closing schools or eliminating 4500 seats. This consideration, however, only affects 14% of respondents and consequently does not determine average results.

In addition to checking off all concerns that mattered to them, participants also selected the single most important reason for and the single most important reason against closing schools. They also indicated how strong that consideration was on a seven point scale. These results could differ from the results in Table 4 because Table 4 results do not take into account how strong each consideration is in a person's reasoning about their decision. By and large, the results of these new analyses conform to expectations from Table 4, except in one respect. The "Closing schools does not address educational concerns" consideration was selected by 48% of participants as their single most important reason, followed by the next most important reason at 12% of participants. The strength of this consideration significantly affects the school closing and eliminating 4500 seats decisions.

Even with all the reasons controlled, lower-income people continue to be unenthusiastic about closing schools or eliminating 4500 seats, though marginally less so. This indicates that the reasons do not capture much of why income has this effect. Appendix A might suggest to the reader what additional reasons may have been missing. A few participants decided to give their own main reasons for opposing or supporting the closing of schools. These reasons may offer clues regarding what reasons were missing. They do hint at the possibility that for lower-income people closing schools may be more disruptive, may create transportation problems, and raise concerns about violence.

Summary and Conclusion

Findings indicate that a representative sample of the Pittsburgh city population supported four of five educational policy proposals for Pittsburgh after discussing and carefully considering information about these proposals. The policies supported by strong majorities were: closing schools in the future generally, eliminating 4500 seats over three years specifically, eliminating middle schools by going to a K-8 system, and adding small learning communities to the high schools. Participants were divided on the policy of allowing choice of schools within larger regions. These majorities readily persist after statistically reweighting the sample to make it even more representative of the city. The project found strong opinion change from before participants learned about and discussed the policies to after. There were substantial increases in agreement regarding closing schools, eliminating 4500 seats, and eliminating middle schools. There was a substantial decrease in support for the regional choice plan, and a very small movement against small learning communities primarily by people who were undecided.

African-Americans generally supported the same policies as non-African-Americans, though their support for closing schools, eliminating 4500 seats, and eliminating middle schools was not as strong. Also, the regional choice plan won majority support among African-American participants. The strongest differences of opinion in the sample, however, were by income. Those making less than \$20,000 per year were opposed to eliminating 4500 seats, did not have a majority in favor of closing schools, and supported regional choice.

Closing schools and eliminating 4500 seats achieved majority support in part because many participants put considerable weight on two considerations: that keeping underused schools open wastes money and, to a lesser extent, that closing schools would be a good time to institute educational reforms. Ninety-two percent of participants indicated that they did, however, have some worries about closing schools. The most important of these were: closing schools may not save as much money as proposed, that it is important to keep schools in the neighborhoods, and that closing schools does not address educational concerns. Few people indicated the concern that their child might be affected significantly influenced their policy attitudes. Nor did having or expecting to have a child in the public schools.

Participants discussed and had many comments about educational policy going beyond the five policies that form the focus of the body of this report. Appendix C, which contains the observations of our discussion facilitators, delve into these many other thoughts and would be well worth reading by anyone interested in educational policy in the Pittsburgh area. Appendices A and B present actual typed comments by participants.

Appendix A: Additional Reasons Participants Cited For and Against Closing Schools (Verbatim)

Other Reasons To Not Close Schools
Closing schools affects the local societal structure and stability - may save no money, does not necessarily improve education, and can destabilize local community by removing a meeting center.
As family and community involvement is critical, more work needs to be done to understand how to make new students and families truly apart of the new school community, how to "extend" the boundaries of communities to incorporate the areas from of the new students. If appropriate consideration is not given to the these matters and programs are not developed to foster transition, acclimation and entrenchment in the school and surrounding community there are likely to be negative consequences.
it usually affect African American children negatively whenever the Pgh Public schools close schools.
teACHERS MAY NOT TEACH WITH COMMITMENT.
Closing schools is not the solution to educational concerns and the cost/economics in and of itself. Unless it's conducted as part of a larger, holistic solution to bridge the achievement/racial gap in this city that includes serious committment on the part of the School Board, the School District staff (including teachers), the City and the overall community to a NEW approach to educating our children to sustain & renew Pittsburgh quality of life.
if they close the schools, it might be too difficult for parent to get their kids to schools.
Bussing
I don't want more schools to close. They should keep kids in neighborhood schools so don't have to bus children around.
you cant put neighborhoods together and not expect violence
neighborhood schools arw safer
racial segregation
There is more concern about the financial side then the child's educational benifit.
there taking schools out the black communities and thats a big concern for me my brothers both will be attending high school and one of them has a.d.d. disorder and mild retardation what if something happens he wont be close to were i can go get him he has asma im really concerned
depends on how they are closed

I am currently a teacher in the PPS so if schools are closed my job may be affected
family of mine are teachers in the schools and the loss of there jobs worries me the most.
kids geting home safe. the bus drivers check the buses to make sure no kids or left behind.
I am primarily opposed to the method of teaching our children at the present my idea might be radical but i think that this country is wealthy enough to teach each and every child privately.
My granddaughter will be affected
The materials suggest that the overall problem with the Pittsburgh Public Schools is overall inefficiency. In general, school closing seems only to partially treat one small aspect of this general inefficiency.
I have two children in Schenely and if it were to close they would be affected.
the plan or plans may not be the best thing to do in the long run
thee marginal children who are disruptive and dont seem mootived to find work to do on their own

Other Reasons to Close Schools
<p>I think that the K-8 is a good compromise. Neighborhood k-6 schools could be combined into larger middle schools, such as Reizenstein. Some good high schools could benefit from increasing to 9-12 such as Peabody and Alderdice. If the kids are kept in more locally focused area, parent participation could be enhanced. I like the ideal of the small sections in the high school and don't feel that it should only be for selected topics. All kids do better work in small classed with the same core group of teachers.</p> <p>Also, when a standard of excellence is expected to be met, the kids will rise to meet it. They recognize "dumbing down" and often are insulted by it. They lose respect for the whole system and turn it off. My sympathy is for the whole system that permits it. They want challenge, not pap.</p>
<p>low test scores should one reason to consider closing schools and only in combination with empty seats, underused schools. The consideration of using underused schools for consolidation of schools should always be a consideration before building new schools or refurbishing old schools.</p>
<p>It woyuld be an opportunity to close and disperse schools with unmanagable populations.</p>
<p>to the best of my knowledge we are only educating 50% of our</p>

<p>children to keep up with the rest of the civilized world and i sincerely believe that this great country of ours could educate every child.</p>
<p>Educational benefits to all Pittsburgh school children need to be paramount. With fewer students in the future, resources need to be directed in the best and most cost-effective ways to educate our young people, while preserving our neighborhoods.</p>
<p>If some schools are totally out of date and cannot be made handicap-accessible or energy-efficient, then it may be effective to tear down and replace the old buildings. Esthetics do have their place, too.</p>
<p>Unless you give regional school choice and let everyone have the option to go to the schools that are small and according to the families that use them "are wonderful", it is not fair to the rest of the students to have to go to schools that are overcrowded or in disrepair while students going to the underused school virtually get a private education. If the school is that good, let everyone have a chance to go there.</p>
<p>Worried that kids (including grand kids) get a good education. And I think they get a good education in the public schools provided we have good teachers, and concerned teachers.</p>
<p>In general, there seems to be no pressing need to close schools.</p>
<p>This would save the school district money that could lower taxes or be utilized to better the educational value.</p>
<p>if schools need to be closed to better educate students and provide a secure environment. then i would have a reason to close some. schools all reflect community problems and social issues</p>
<p>If infrastructure is beyond repair or too costly to justify, or if the population cannot support a most minimum level of occupancy (ie not one class in each grade) are the only general reasons I can think of for closing a school.</p>

**Appendix B: End of Deliberation Day Comments by
Participants Regarding Reasons For Choosing Policy Options
(Verbatim)**

<p>I would've liked to have seen some data on:

1) the possible financial impact of renting out space in existing schools (for example, the Pittsburgh Chess Club pays \$800/month to rent a room at the Wightman School on Solway St. in Squirrel Hill). By my calculations, with ~16,000 empty seats in PPS, at 40 people per room, that's 400 rooms, and about \$4,000,000 per year in possible income. It could allow many underattended school buildings to remain open, serving the needs of the local community. And, a quick search of the internet, under "renting public school space" indicated that many school districts around the country already rent out space to both profit-making and non-profit groups and organizations. How much of this are we doing?

2) the demographics of the school closings done to date (for example, have we already made most of the easy, highly cost-effective cuts?) Nowhere could I find the rationale for the school board's decision on this score.

3) nowhere did I see a reason or explanation for why our ratio of staff members to teachers is so high (1:1)</p>
<p>my kids dont go to public school. the reasons are to many to name them all so here are a few..... overcrowding, no real security, teachers have no power to disaplane a student, most kids are there because they have nowhere else to go, too many students not enough quility teachers. to much play time not enough learning time, bad behavior students are not delt with in the correct way by being put in another school so the kids who want to learn can. thank you for a nice day the staff was very helpful.</p>
<p>I feel I have had access to valuable information today, information that has changed my mind about school closing.
This type of information should be available to the general public to inform them of alternatives to the plans put forth by the school board.</p>
<p>It's important to remember that no one decision will be a cure-all. The impoant thing is to remember the fundamentals of why this choice has come about.
In the end don't sacrifice student education for the benefit of the "bottom line".</p>
<p>Incorporating the pros from 2,3,&4 could help Pittsburgh Public Schools get on track.</p>

<p>schools should be closed only when the displace children can be sent to a school within a reasonable distance from their previous school to minimize cost of transportation and the effects of being removed from their neighborhood.</p>
<p>I thought I read that the school board could save \$10,000,000 by closing schools, that figure didn't appear on the last page.
I hope the suggestions we came up with today will be forwarded to the Board of Education even though I realize that really isn't the reason behind this research.

I enjoyed my day.</p>
<p>More emphasis has to be placed on increasing achievement scores.</p>
<p>Before reading the material today, I didnt realize how many options the Pittsburgh School System had to choose from. I also didnt know that schools were switching back to a K-8 system and I am glad to know that Pittsburgh is considering this option. Reading this material really made me want to have a discussion. Although I wasn't able to participate in the discussion today, I hope that I will be able to engage in the online discussions in the future. I learned a lot today and I will be paying more attention to this issue facing our community.</p>
<p>i think the saving from the school closings wassupposed to be 8 million.</p>
<p>The reading was a lot to digest in a short time. I think the format can be very useful, but further discussions need to result from the initial data. For example the data collected cannot be used in a vacuum but must be linked to other sytemic problems, political and financial within the city itself. We are in this mess because the school board cammits itself to actions without regard to city needs and resources.</p>
<p>discouraging information</p>
<p>I wish I had had more opportunity to read the literature before trying to form my opinions and participate in the discussions. I would like to have more information on who is making school closing decisions, the criteria being used, and on comparisons with other cities. For example, members of our group thought that transportation costs would not reduce savings from school closings as in rural communities. Is there another city that has a comparable situation? Are there projections comparing the costs of all the alternatives? I thought this whole process was very interesting but the survey questions didn't really assess the complexity of my/our positions on the four options. Nevertheless I hope and believe it will be beneficial.</p>
<p>saving money in the PPS is one thing, but should also think of the children educational needs. Busing them to far away places aren't going to help them much,for how much time they have to spent away from homeand much time they have to do their studies.</p>

I want to thank you for giving me a chance to voice my opinion. i have teenage daughters who share their opinions with me. I wish the school board nothing but success

School reform doesn't need to be closely related to the community - the community will adapt to new and better education opportunities.

Review students for "small learning communities" and magnet programs bi-annually. Allow students with reasonable grades to request transfer to groups they are interested in.

K-8 is also good because the teachers don't need to adjust to new students. Middle schools become generalized because students aren't there long enough to justify or implement adaptations to the school program.

THE TEACHERS SHOULD BE MOTIVATED BY SOMETHING OTHER THAN MONEY. Teachers just doing a job should be the first to be fired.

It seems that the two problems needed to be addressed are the quality of teaching in the city schools and the declining enrollment. Many of my neighbors send their children to private schools because of the perception that a better education can be gained. This was also the case when I lived in Philadelphia too. I also happened to live three blocks away from an outstanding city school (Alderdice) and know children who have gone on to very good universities. As a single adult, educated in a public school in PA (Pennsbury), it would be my preference to send my child to a public school as well. That said, living where I do affords me that opportunity. I do think it is imperative to focus on the quality of the teachers throughout the county though, whether the child lives in Squirrel Hill or the Hill. As an aside, my graduating class was 832 students. We had two 9 and 10th grade schools and met in 11 and 12th at the high school.

I believe the Board stated that they would save more than 10million dollars a year, not the fifteen stated in the question.

I am sorry but I didn't remember all of the statistics. I do know that a great deal of money will be saved and that we will still be able to educate the children. I do want to say that the Literacy Plus program in the district has improved all test scores. I have seen what a difference this program makes in the children are struggling to read. I enjoyed the online discussions and I now know that there are people in Pittsburgh who are not as provincial in their thinking as I thought. I have hope that Pittsburgh can become a progressive and productive city that attracts young people and that young people that are here, choose to stay here.

Very helpful process. The small learning group concept was new to me but seems a wonderful concept to explore in Pittsburgh as plans for consolidation and reform move forward.

<p>i think for the most part this study is good. the bottom line is this , in order to successfully help the Pittsburgh school problem, you msut fix the adminstrative side of it as while as the educational part. because the bottom line is too teach the children. they are the future.</p>
<p>This has been a very enlightening experience! I am not in the education field and was unaware of all the problems I learned about. Being in the 'marketing, advertising, PR fields,' I think the word is not being made public through the main-stream media (not surprising). I read where the school board hired a public relations firm - either they should be fired or find out why they are not effectively doing their job. Perhaps the school board should publish their own publication which could be a self-liquidating expense through paid advertising. Advertisers are always interested in children and education! Thanks for today's experience!</p>
<p>I'm all for the K-8 school consolidation because it recognizes the importance of the quality of the earlier stages of child education, an emphasis on which will generate the greatest positive feedback at the high school level. I believe that a focus on strengthening and continuing a comprehensive and nurturing learning environment throughout students' most difficult developmental years will make it easier for them to handle the transition to a high school and will lessen the impact of the school's various detriments on their ability to continue learning. It seems to me that the long-term benefits of implementing such a structure override the heftier financial investments required for this plan, especially given the School Board's possession of an \$8 million budget surplus whose circulation back into the community may or may not benefit the local economy.</p>
<p>The idea of small learning groups in consolidated schools should be tried on a very small scale before any implementation occurs.</p>
<p>My ideas of educating our children are very radical. I believe that USA can educate every child in our country by using our resources in the correct way. Most people do not agree with my solution but i maintained my position for many years and I know in my own heart that unless we educate our children, our entire way of life in the best country of the world will be endangered.</p>
<p>Issues are somewhat muddied by the "No Child Left Behind" act which likely precludes some choices that otherwise might be made.</p>
<p>social breakdown is the key issue that should be discussed</p>

The decision to close or keep open neighborhood schools should be based on increasing student's performances and opportunities not politicalized fiscal projections. This issue is not about money. How do you put a price on a child's education? It is about increasing our sense of community by expanding our definitions of our world. Narrow-mindedness protects self interest at the expense of our common good. I agree with the Mayor's study which finds a demographically elected school board is motivated to serve specific needs of their constituents. The flip side is a professional body with its own agenda. In the end, a strong community produces strong schools and strong schools build a stronger community. The issue here is who pays for those who can not afford to contribute. With the externalities of crime and urban decay, we all pay one way or another. I support small, neighborhood schools because they work. Education is about focusing our attention to better understand how we think. This is a more difficult job if we do not learn to do it as a child. When education fails, the world it produces leaves none of us safe. It only temporarily balances our estimated budgets.

This was an educational experience. I'm very glad that I had participated today. I think the program used for discussion should be launched online for anyone in the Pittsburgh area. Pittsburgh communities need a device like this to trigger change towards city problems such as the topic discussed today.

I found it hard to have a solid opinion on some of the issues because of the fact that I do not have children. I do however believe that kids should have a chance to go to a school with the room, resources, and staff that will help shape them into decent human beings and give them a decent chance in the world. It sure doesn't get any easier.

There are clearly more issues than the four options for discussion. The money saved by closing a school is negligible compared to the damage to community spirit, change in perceived property values, loss of a community center, safety risks in transport of very small children far from home. If the children don't come first now, no amount of money will save us in the future!

I hope that in some small way, I have contributed to a better understanding of how the Pittsburgh public school board may continue to persue the education of our city's school children.

thanks

i hope this sheds some light on the difficult decisions that are necessary
and
that the issues are clarified between policy and economics

I wished there was more information on the four choices that were available. This is a graet idea. I hope "someone" uses the information to help the children!!!

<p>I think a combination of regional choice, K-8 schools and small learning communities could work for the Pittsburgh Public Schools. It shouldn't and doesn't have to be just one or the other. I have always been a big proponent of K-8 schools. I think the middle school system, particularly in inner city school systems fails kids miserably. In addition to the reasons listed in the library materials, I think K-8 schools keep kids humble and remind them of where they came from. Eliminating middle schools and having all K-8 schools would be a good way to bring back neighborhood schools with regional choice for children who do not feel their home schools are up to snuff, thus eliminating non-effective schools. Small community schools in the high schools are working well in the magnet programs and should be included in the traditional classroom programs.</p>
<p>I enjoyed this and I learned a lot from the others. I don't think we reached consensus but I have a much better understanding of the issues and myself.</p>
<p>I believe K-8 is the best solution to pittsburgh public school! The materials you provided today is very helpful to solidate my vote.</p>
<p>This has been a valuable learning experience. I hope that I have contributed to the community in a positive way through my participation. Thank you!</p>
<p>I do not agree with the four suggested policy changes presented. I believe that we should have moved forward with closing all the proposed school set forth by Dr. Thompson. These policies are not necessarily the answer for ALL students.</p>
<p>I personally feel that there is no one solution that will adequately resolve the state of public education in Pittsburgh. I am confident that the use of two or more of the scenerios put forth today will be a more effective use of resources. Moving to a K-8 system, incorporating small learning centers in larger schools and closing some schools would bring about a chnage in the success of public education in Pittsburgh.</p>
<p>I would hope that this study contributes to the overall shaping of the Pittsburgh Public School system for the future, and that these projects help in that process.</p>
<p>I want to thank you for letting me participate in this survey. I have really benifted from it and really learned alot about my community. This session has made me really want to have a say in my community and want to try to better in in the best way i can.</p>
<p>I think this was a worthwhile study. Excellent points were made by all participants. I enjoyed the study interaction and look forward to helping out if asked :-)</p>

<p>I have very much enjoyed today's discussions. I learned a great deal that will help me to make my family and neighbors better informed about the closing that are bound to come in the near future.</p>
<p>my children are not in school yet, but this has opened my eyes to the dire situation that the school systems are in. Whatever the outcome, it will effect my children.</p>
<p>our schools, our communities, our cities and our country is in big trouble. we somehow must see a way to work together to solve these problems and issues with success. and not work as two separate groups----- the rich and the poor people need to find common ground to creat a better
world for all.</p>
<p>I changed my mind on very liberal/liberal because I think I hold some views that are conservative. After listening to others I decided to take a more objective or relativistic approach to the question and decided I am very liberal.

Some of these questions were hard to answer because I don't think my group made any certain policy choices.</p>
<p>The use of scholarly journals was effective in persuading me. I enjoyed being able to review statistics and make comparisons with similiar cities. I now wonder why the District has not had a focus on creating more K-8 schools. That seemed to be one of the better ways to meet the students' needs, as well as the fiscal needs. The articles provided plenty background information about the origin of the Mayor's Commission, as well as demographic infomation about the District. This study has not only enlightened me, but it has given me a greater understanding of how problems are identified and solutions are brainstormed and eventually solved. Thank you for your consideration.</p>
<p>I enjoyed the opportunity to participate and exchange views with other participants. It was nice to find out that there are other citizens who care about education and the future of the city as much as I do. I hope our thoughts and suggestions are taken seriously, and that action will be taken soon to make the Pittsburgh Public School System better.</p>
<p>I think strong leadership, smaller classroom sizes, and the k-8 or high schools with smaller communities would benefit the Pittsburgh school district substantially. I would like to thank you for this opportunity to voice my opinion. Good luck with the rest of your surveys and with the final outcome.</p>
<p>I enjoyed the conversation a lot. I learned a lot. I had few comments although i am not really in to politics. What i believe is parents and teachers should correct them if kids are misbehaving...</p>
<p>I learned a tremendous amount today - thank you! (Now to put some of that new knowledge into action in my community...)</p>

<p>Thank you for the opportunity to come and express my opinions! Continued good success on your VA Project.</p>
<p>I do not think anyone in my group was an athlete...they wanted to do away with high school sports...I feel this would be a travesty...you learn a lot in school that you do not learn in the classroom...sports provide physical fitness, comraderie, school spirit, discipline...and help students become well rounded...</p>
<p>Interesting. I felt the readings were perhaps biased to favor a K-8 preference.</p>
<p>I enjoyed participating in this program. Education is an extremely important key to attracting people to again make a home in Pittsburgh and thus, to revitalizing the city of Pittsburgh. A strong education system in this country is also key in ensuring that we have a strong society. The issues are complex, but the solutions are attainable. I hop that our elected officials have the wisdom and the courage to take the steps necessary to correct these problems.</p>
<p>It is very unfortunate that Pgh doesn't have racially balanced communities that would allow neighborhood schools to be a success, thus increasing the need for bussing and continued efforts being made to balance the schools with the objection of many parents in better neighborhoods. It is a very complex issue that will take some willingness on the part of the parents, educators, and school board members to get a viable resolution.</p>
<p>Although I completed 46 years as a professional educator, 16 years in public schools and 30 years in college and university levels, I found the study of this problem both interesting and enlightening. I agree it demands the attention of the entire community in reaching a solution.</p>
<p>Thank YOU for the opportunity to participate. I truly feel much more informed about this issue, and motivated to become involved in some way going forward, though I've not yet determined how to best match my available time/interest level/resources to the issues at hand. If nothing else, I feel the information you provided was much less biased than anything I've seen on the topic in the news media, and strongly urge you to recommend sharing at least the Core outline of the policies along with the PRO/CON summaries in YOUR format (objective, clear, no hidden agenda) more widely.</p>
<p>I believe eliminating the middle schools would be of great benefit to the school system. Making the schools K - 8 would benefit students and the community. I see children going to the middle school every day -- they looked bored, uninspired, carry no books, are rude -- they need help.</p>

thank you, This gave me an opportunity to think more about my opinions and beliefs on subject of the Pittsburgh School system and the City Of Pittsburgh government and the communities of Pittsburgh.

i hope what we did here today, helps to add input to the problems the school board is having. and mabey helps them to do the right thing for the children of our city...

Appendix C: Comments of Deliberation Facilitators

Each online or face-to-face discussion had a graduate student facilitator to help keep discussion topical and to keep it flowing. The facilitators had a multitude of observations about the content of discussion, which are repeated below, All italics were added by me to highlight especially important comments.

Facilitator #1:

- . The consistent message from participants was that the first priority should be on improving the quality of the education. Addressing other issues, including the four options, was seen as secondary to this concern. Most did not make the connection that the four options were supposed to address this.
- . Most of the people who had children enrolled in private or parochial schools did so because of the perceived poor quality of the public school system.
- . I wholeheartedly agree with as Jesse and Patricia noted, many of my groups found the four policy choices to be inadequate and focused too heavily on cost savings. Many people were quite vocal in rejecting the notion that they perceived that they had to pick a best option.
- . The ideal class size was viewed to be around 25, but no greater.
- . A number of groups, but not all, favored a best of both worlds option in the sense that the K-8 option should be implemented and then grades 9-12 should be comprised of the small learning communities.
- . My discussions tended to start with general deliberations of the four topics and people tended to form solid judgments about the merits of each of these. However, this became less so once I encouraged them to discuss the specifics and the pros and cons of the options.
- . For example, upon delving into the details of the K-8 option, there was more of a split with roughly half the participants perceiving that older students would serve as a positive influence as mentors while the other half felt their presence would be disruptive to the younger students.
- . The status quo option was for the most part greeted with contempt and hostility by the participants. However, once issues such as increased transportation costs and decreased property values in the neighborhoods where schools would be close and the disparate impact on minorities was raised, roughly 1/3 to 1/2 of the groups began to reconsider their opposition to this choice.
- . The regional choice was viewed as synonymous with the magnet school system.

- . One suggestion was that more experienced teachers should be given better incentives to teach in schools located in poorer communities.
-

Facilitator #2:

For whatever it's worth, I thought I'd write a little summary of my experiences as a facilitator.

First are some things that were expressed in almost every session:

- Good leadership is crucial. The principal of a school must be effective, and so must the superintendent and the school board.
- The school board before Isler was president was argumentative and unprofessional to an extreme degree. Many people were embarrassed/ shocked by their conduct.
- It is too difficult to fire poor teachers.
- Every attempt should be made to preserve some kind of neighborhood schools to cut down on busing.
- More closings/ consolidations after those announced in June 2004 would be necessary, but should be made fairly, without undue burden to poor neighborhoods. Very few people argued that the schools with tiny enrollment should be kept just as they are, but that some reasonable attempt at maintaining neighborhood ties, especially for the smallest children, should be made.
- It seems that everyone has the best interests of all children in mind. Almost everyone agreed that children who are dangerous, disruptive, etc. hurt the schools, but almost no one thought these children should be neglected by the district. Almost everyone thought that these children should be given extra help to try to improve their lives as much as possible, yet they should not be allowed to hurt kids who were trying hard to learn and follow the rules. Almost every group commented that suspension of misbehaving students is counterproductive.
- I have rarely seen any hint of any kind of racism. Most people seemed to truly want to see successful, diverse schools where everyone achieves and no one is the loser.
- Socio-economically, it seems like the more well-educated, well-informed East End residents are the most vocal proponents of the public schools because their children attend magnet schools and are very happy with those schools.
- Most everyone expressed admiration for the new CAPA high school, and dismay at the closing of Connelly Tech Institute.
- Most everyone expressed the opinion that disadvantaged and/or African American children are more hurt by the current system, and that that was unacceptable and improvements should be made.

-Many, but not all people seemed to like the K-8 option because they felt it made parents more active in the schools.

-Many, but not all, expressed a fear that magnet schools are not fair to underprivileged children, especially those with uninterested parents. Many people vehemently argued the opposite: that magnet schools are a great equalizer.

-Most everyone thought that inattentive, uncaring, parents were one of the district's greatest problems.

Elaborations on the above comments:

Over and over it was stressed that good public education is a crucial part of a good community. It has a huge impact on real estate, and real estate, of course, has a huge impact on the region's economic situation.

With only a few exceptions (probably less than ten individuals total), the people I had in my groups really wanted to talk, and were glad for the opportunity. Many of them had lengthy ties to the community. For example, for many, their children had attended Pittsburgh public schools, they had served on many school committees, had attended or watched school board meetings on TV, etc.

I was also very impressed by their knowledge. In many cases, the participants knew a lot more about the Pittsburgh Public Schools than I did. They filled in gaps in my knowledge in many places.

As I noted earlier, I found little evidence of racism, even though most people openly expressed the opinion that Pittsburgh neighborhoods tend to be very segregated. In most cases, most people expressed the opinion that a racially and socio-economically diverse school is better for children than one that is not. Many people commented on how their children received a "slice of life" at school, and they were glad for it. I think it was due to the population; the people who attended tended to be devoted city dwellers. They live in the city not because they have to, but because they're firm advocates of urban living.

Also, as I noted previously, the need for good leadership was stressed in every session. A good school board and good principals in the schools were acknowledged by everyone to be crucial. As for whether Pittsburgh should change to an appointed board as opposed to an elected board, sentiment was mixed. The biggest question, asked over and over again, was, "Who would do the appointing?" For many, that is the crucial question. Many pointed out that up until, I think, the 1970's, Pittsburgh had an appointed school board. It was changed to an elected board in an attempt to make the system more democratic. Going backwards might not solve anything, many thought, although certainly the low voter turnout and bitter partisanship that have characterized the elected board are very problematic.

Everyone mentioned the board! Almost to the last person, they had comments about how appalling the board's behavior had been in the past. Over and over I heard comments like, "I was embarrassed for them," "I was shocked," "It was unbelievable," "I couldn't believe they acted

like that when they knew they were being televised." Most people expressed the opinion that things had improved somewhat with Isler's leadership. Several times, as I think facilitator #4 noted as well, the idea of a hybrid board was suggested. Whenever this came up, most people agreed that it would be a good idea. In such a hybrid board, some members would be elected by district, and some members would be elected at large. That would preserve the democracy element while eliminating the overt parochialism, so the argument goes.

As for Thompson, I did not hear a lot of anti-Thompson talk, as some of the other facilitators seem to have encountered. Most people thought he was doing a fine job and was being treated unfairly. Yet, on the other hand, almost everyone expressed the opinion that administrative spending was out of control. One comment that stood out for me was from a lady who referred to the Oakland headquarters as "the Winter Palace."

The subject of capacity was well debated. Everyone agreed that 30% excess capacity was, overall, a bad thing, but they did not agree on just what to do about it. For example, they couldn't agree on just what defined excess capacity. Many thought that the capacity figures were inaccurate to start with. They felt that if the schools were somehow filled to their stated capacities they would not be functioning at some kind of optimal level; they would instead be overcrowded. The benefits of small class size were stressed over and over.

Student behavior emerged as a major theme. Almost everyone perceived a decline in discipline in today's students, and felt that was a negative thing that was causing most, if not all, of the current problems. There were no easy answers on how to address this, but as I said before, every time the subject of suspension came up, everyone was against it. Discussions of student behavior always led to discussions of parent behavior, and again, there were no easy answers to questions of what to do with uncaring, dysfunctional, and/or inattentive parents.

Another major theme was neighborhood schools. For many, they are an ideal towards which we should strive, but also many people admitted that they simply may not always be feasible in today's world of declining enrollment and tight budgets. *It was pointed out over and over that underprivileged families tend to be hurt by busing because if they are underprivileged, they are probably lacking in transportation and child care options, and therefore, have a hard time going to their child's school. Once they stop going to the school, results go down.* (Emphasis mine.)

I think K-8 was the clear winner of the four options. *For many, it was seen as a way to preserve the ideal of the neighborhood school: that even if one's neighborhood couldn't support an elementary school, some area somewhat near to one's neighborhood should have no trouble supporting a K-8 school. Over and over it was expressed that K-8 allows siblings to stay together, and this was perceived as a benefit. For today's harried parents, only having to go to one school as opposed to perhaps three to pick up kids, attend meetings, etc., was seen as a great benefit.* Also, it was seen as a great benefit that the siblings could take comfort in each other's presence and sort of „look out for% each other.

Everyone agreed that busing should be avoided if at all possible, but not everyone thought it was possible to avoid it. Many said that, ideally we'd have a Mount Lebanon-style system where every child walks to school, but that this simply wouldn't be feasible.

The magnet schools were somewhat controversial, as I mentioned before. The proponents loved them for their diversity and the opponents thought they were elitist. When the proponents pointed out to the opponents that anyone could apply for magnet schools, the opponents said yes, but underprivileged children tend to have under-involved parents who don't do what needs to be done to get into a magnet school.

I think the small learning communities option was the least understood. I think that's because there just wasn't enough information about it in the library. It was too open ended, and people didn't have enough specifics to grab onto.

Another main theme was facts. The participants want facts, and they want them to be publicly available, I found. All agreed that the district simply has not provided enough hard facts on what it takes to run each facility, what could be saved, etc. When we have more facts, it was said over and over, we can make better decisions that aren't just „political%.

Another main theme was disparity. Everyone agreed that the schools were unequal. Almost everyone commented that the same system contained schools with national reputations like Allerdice and CAPA and schools with the abysmal performance indicated in the Mayor's Commission report.

My comments here would not be complete without a discussion of the individuals I met. Obviously, I can't publicly disclose facts about them for the sake of privacy, but I must stress how impressed I was by many of them. Many of them were the kind of people I want to emulate: community-minded folks who are knowledgeable and make rational, yet compassionate decisions about community issues, and who feel that community activism/volunteerism is their duty, not something they'll do someday when they get a chance. They are true citizens, I think, in the definition you are researching.

Facilitator #3:

In general, agreed with facilitator #2's comments, but added some of his own:

- The presence of some teachers who do not truly care about the children, who are focused primarily upon getting their paycheck and getting out. One proposal to address teacher motivation was establishment of district-wide recognition and incentives for excellent teaching.
- Future school closings should be based upon a transparent set of data and criteria. In past rounds of school closings the decision to retain or close particular schools was based upon political considerations and those closings disproportionately targeted schools in African-American areas.

I did not hear many comments about suspension of misbehaving students. Almost everyone felt that closing Leche (spelling?) the high school designed to handle misbehaving/pregnant students was a mistake.

-Most extended the view that magnet schools are a great equalizer to school choice in general. The most powerful proponents of school choice are those who have participated in the magnet school programs of the district, particularly the students.

-Most recognized joint community and school responsibility for coping with the difficulties resulting from inattentive, uncaring parents.

Participants raised a number of issues that fell beyond the bounds of the four policy options presented. In almost every discussion session the issue of educational quality figured prominently. Many participants felt that the quality of the education provided by the public schools was the most important consideration. In some cases this led to dissatisfaction with presented options that they felt were overly focused on cost savings. In other cases, this informed choice among options. Perceived educational quality critically influences willingness to support school budgets. People are willing to pay (or retain current funding levels if the schools are good).

Educational quality has multiple dimensions, and participants highlighted several across multiple discussions.

School discipline. In some schools (and Rosecrantz came in for particular criticism in one group) participants felt that there is little time for teaching due to the discipline problems and the need for teachers to focus their energies on simply maintaining some degree of control. Participants identified multiple factors contributing to discipline problems.

1. The most commonly cited source of difficulties is lack of parental involvement – parents who are unwilling or unable to involve themselves in controlling their children and promoting good behavior in schools. One ex-marine who was a former school police officer told how he dealt with discipline problems by his sons. One son was acting like a clown in class. The father, working night shift, told the son that he would begin coming to class and sitting in the back of the room to observe his son's behavior.

a. Some participants associated the lack of parental involvement primarily with single parent families,

b. A few also associated the lack of parental involvement with the hectic schedules of parents attempting to make ends meet.

c. A few mentioned safety concerns.

d. Others were concerned about communications gaps between parents and teachers.

Actions that the schools could take to improve parental involvement.

I. Deliver notes concerning student performance to parents using the postal service and/or electronic mail – do not rely on students to deliver notes that highlight poor performance.

II. Ensure that the Public School Community Councils function as intended. For example, some of these councils are not involved or informed about the crafting budget priorities for their schools, even though some participants believed that this was intended to be part of their role.

2. Some participants employed by the school district felt that the district had de-emphasized discipline in the schools, and that this should perhaps be reemphasized.

3. In addition, the issue of school discipline was related by some participants to the size of certain schools. As middle schools climb above a size (perhaps about four hundred) where teachers can all get to know each student, for example, discipline becomes more difficult. Many hoped that a move towards K-8 schools would help.

The ability of teachers to teach:

Several teachers involved in the discussions voiced frustration with the degree to which their “hands are tied” by administration in designing lessons. There is one approved curriculum for teaching reading, for example, and this means that if that is not working for a particular student the teacher is not free to try alternative approaches. In addition to the curricular limitations, teachers felt that paperwork was taking up an excessively large part of their day.

Few participants linked this to the one-to-one ratio of teachers to support staff, but a group that included someone who worked at the school board building did reach the conclusion that there was substantial waste at the administrative level. This is a concern not specifically addressed by school consolidation. Two groups did come up with remedies that could perhaps address over-regulation of the school board, and earn money for the district: specifically that the school board offices in Oakland be sold (perhaps to PITT or CMU, and the school district headquarters moved to one of the closed high-schools. This suggestion was offered in a spirit of levity.

Implementation of the alternatives:

K-8 was generally a popular alternative. Participants spend a substantial amount of time discussing ways to implement this alternative appropriately.

A substantial concern with a move towards k-8 is potential negative influence of older children on younger children. This could be addressed by:

1. Separating older from younger students.

2. Gradual implementation of k-8. For example, instead of closing a middle school and shifting to k-8 at once, one could gradually shift to k-8 by first retaining the sixth grade, then the seventh grade, etc. in a particular elementary school. Although this idea would probably be more expensive in the short-run, many citizens of Pittsburgh appear willing to maintain the current cost structure, or even incur some additional costs provided that education improves substantially.

In addition, in the groups where it was raised, the idea of doing a selective transition to k-8 seemed to meet with broad assent. The performance of district middle schools varies widely – some seem to work well, while others appear to function very poorly. By selectively shifting to K-8, successful middle schools would be maintained, and unsuccessful and/or excessively large middle schools would be replaced.

Preferences on the K-8 proposal were associated with the kind of system that participants attended. Those who went to K-8 schools as children nearly always favored the K-8 reform. Among those who attended middle schools, some favored K-8, often because of negative experiences, but others saw no reason to abolish the middle schools. These were also more likely to be concerned about the negative impact of older children on younger.

Retaining the Status Quo:

In many groups no one sought to maintain the status quo, and at times the only consensus reached by all group members was that the status quo could not be maintained because of dropping enrolment. However, some considerations did motivate retaining the status quo.

Most important is the combination of smaller class sizes and neighborhood schools potentially offered best by retention of a status quo with substantial numbers of empty seats. While most saw a need for some reforms to the status quo, many participants felt that neighborhood schools were important.

One group that particularly favored the status quo option raised a series of unanswered questions about the method by which the number of empty seats was determined, citing personal experiences that schools reported to have substantial numbers of empty seats seemed to in fact be at capacity. For example, according to one participant Taylor Alderdice is supposed to have a capacity to hold more than 2000 students, but apparently it is sufficiently crowded at present that some teachers do not have their own class rooms but must ‘float’.

Regional Choice:

Two main concerns led many to discount regional choice: inequity and unpredictability. Many were concerned that regional choice would accentuate existing disparities between races, and between students with involved and uninvolved parents. In addition, many are concerned about the uncertainty of regional choice and resultant administrative complexity. It is impossible to know in advance which schools will be selected against, nor to foresee precisely how many students will transfer to a particular school. Enrolment limits would be necessary to prevent severe overcrowding at ‘good’ schools, but these could exacerbate inequalities. Many participants were concerned about the students left behind in failing schools because their parents were unwilling or unable to move them to better programs.

In the context of regional choice it is important to provide parents with information to encourage them to become involved in the selection of a school.

Small Learning Communities:

This option was the hardest for participants to understand, and received a range of interpretations. The most popular interpretation is in terms of a range of 'magnet-like' programs within larger high schools: programs that would allow students to pursue a range of focused studies and receive individual attention. The least popular interpretation of small learning communities is of the maintenance of existing school/neighborhood identities within the context of a single consolidated school, as many felt this would lead to severe inter/intra school conflict.

Facilitator #4

There was a large amount of resentment for the superintendent and head of the board. People disliked the way he spent millions to refurbish his office and spent thousands of dollars treating bigwigs to a baseball game, complete with limo ride and catered food.

Opinions were divided over popular election of the school board, but a popular opinion was switching to city wide election of board members instead of district specific delegates. Many believed this would cut down on favoritism and politics.

I found many participants felt teachers needed more authority for discipline. Multiple people brought up teachers inability to even defend themselves against aggressive students for fear of lawsuits and many noted the ineffectiveness of suspension.

Preserving neighborhood schools and cutting down on bussing directly fights against racial integration and most seemed to value neighborhood schools over racially balanced schools. Many saw bussing in the 70's as the cause of community decay. Usually parents found neighborhood schools more crucial in k-8 grades than high schools. In fact, people seemed to very closely link the idea of K-8 with neighborhood schools.

Bussing was usually noted as a tactic to be avoided. Many felt bussing was inefficient and wasted time. Many preferred allowing students to walk to school.

Large majority found schools to be at the center of communities.

It seemed that though closings targeted schools which were predominately African American, most citizens realized that class, not race was the real problem of inequity in the closings.

I found diversity was not a high priority for many citizens. Many seemed to want neighborhood schools at the price of racially integrated areas.

People seemed to link the idea of regional choice and magnet schools together very closely. Many failed to understand the possibility of regional choice without specialized schools.

I found school choice to get a very mixed verdict. People seemed to see a selection effect where magnet schools simply drew good parents and children away from the general pool, rather than inspiring greater parent participation.

Regional choice seemed to be very closely linked to magnet schools and many participants used the phrases interchangeably. Those participants who supported regional choice usually felt it was less necessary for grades K-8, especially when related to a magnet school.

Many bemoaned the closing of the trade colleges and technical schools. “Not everyone needs to go to college” was a phrase that came up many times.

While many expressed the opinion that poor students are hurt, I didn’t hear a large outpouring of sympathy for black students specifically.

Many also liked the K-8 (eliminate middle-schools) option because they felt it gave students confidence and responsibility. Some expressed reservations about bullying.

Overall participants felt the problems of schools had little to do with the format of schools and much more to do with basics like discipline, teacher authority and interest, class size and parental involvement. Most felt these fundamental problems would NOT be solved by simply switching the format of schools around.

Many seemed content with the current tax rate if school education improved.

School uniforms were brought up as a way to equalize socio-economic status in students.

The K-8 policy seemed linked to neighborhood schools and many participants grouped the ideas together for implementation.

Many also expressed fears of “tracking” students to certain programs too soon before skills and interests are adequately determined.