

PRINCETON CHARTER SCHOOL

RESPONSE TO DECEMBER 13, 2106 PPS PRESENTATION

December 22, 2016

Many people have reached out to us questioning the incredible “facts” and claims that were presented at the PPS board meeting on December 13 by a private citizen with a long history of anti-charter activity throughout New Jersey, Julia Sass-Rubin, at the request of the Princeton Public Schools Board of Education (PPS).

As a threshold matter, PPS’s immediate and disingenuous opposition, before reviewing the PCS application and before having the meetings with PCS leaders they claim to have wanted, is disappointing. Clearly, PPS has prejudged the matter. Just as PPS has for years ignored PCS’s prior requests to meet and collaborate, PPS is now ignoring the many PPS families whose children now or previously attended PCS, as well as the many taxpayers who recognize PCS’s cost efficiencies and great outcomes. These students, families, and taxpayers are constituents of PPS whose voices deserved to be heard before PPS rushed to judgment, rushed to poison the well with false and misleading information, and rushed to form an opposition group dedicated to spreading fear and misleading information.

Rather than address real and challenging issues, the PPS board seems to blame Princeton Charter for all its fiscal problems. Meanwhile over the years, it has declined our board’s many offers to meet to help to clarify any misunderstanding about PCS, or to collaborate.

Second, it is equally disappointing the PPS Board and administration were themselves either unwilling or unable to present facts concerning this matter, as is their official duty and responsibility. After the Superintendent’s initial claims of a \$1.4 million impact to the district were promptly disproven by PCS, they were abandoned. Now, admitting that the subject of school funding is too complex for them to explain to the public, they are relying for their “facts” on a private partisan having no official role with the PPS system – and no legal duty or obligation to supply the public with accurate information.

Below are a few points in response to some of the questions and comments we have received that you may find helpful. In terms of what you can do, the most important way that you can be of help is to write letters in support of the charter amendment to the NJ Department of Education and our legislators. This will help balance the taxpayer-funded campaign by PPS that is spreading fear, division, and false information about our Access and Equity Plan. Next is to educate your friends and neighbors about the faulty premises being spread to stoke fear and opposition.

- The alleged impact to the district is presented to the public without acknowledging that **PPS has already authorized a \$1.7 million tax increase** -- without any public vote -- as a result of its projection of 100 new students (some \$17,000 per pupil) from new housing projects. PPS has implemented \$900,000 of that increase over the past two years, and “banked” the remaining \$800,000 increase to be applied in the upcoming 2017-18 budget. **As well, PPS has so far failed to inform the public that the additional new students in excess of its prior projection allow PPS to impose in its upcoming 2017-18 budget yet another even larger tax increase without voter approval to educate these students.**

- Unless the district intends to forego that tax increase, it is simply not dealing forthrightly with taxpayers about the alleged budgetary impact to PPS when it does not recognize that it has and will continue to increase taxes and its budget anyway, regardless of the PCS proposal.
- During the first part of its meeting, PPS used a false economy of scale argument to assert that the three classrooms offered by the PCS expansion would not alleviate the current and projected pressure in PPS K-5 schools. The second part of the Board meeting focused on the district's plan to hire architects and consider building new facilities to handle the potential increase in student population in the District. In November, PPS announced its intention to float additional bonds to pay for such construction. The PPS claim of impact on its budget ignores the most important impact - the taxpayer impact of additional taxes and bonds to fund PPS construction. Adding three classrooms at PCS will entail no bond issue or additional tax burden, and can only reduce the burden PPS imposes on taxpayers.
- We disagree with the patently misleading figures that were presented on December 13 on cost per student, as detailed below.
- At the meeting, it was asserted that PCS essentially does not have any “real” special education students. At this point, 9.6% of the students at PCS are classified as special education with 1/3 of those not speech only.
- The academic performance “data” presented were manipulated to reach an outcome at complete odds with official state data, as well as the experience of most families familiar with the different public schools in Princeton. The so-called “expert” presenter admitted she was unable to explain the way that these data were manipulated. Her methods have not been authorized by the state or undergone academic peer review, and are not even made available publicly for purposes of checking and replicating the results.
- We are disappointed that the PPS Board has chosen to present this issue in overly dramatic terms that are unproductive, unrealistic, and that serve to create a hostile climate, placing PCS students and families at the center of the target. Meanwhile, with the opportunity to renew or terminate its receiving relationship with Cranbury at hand, they have remained silent on significant concerns of many taxpayers such as whether or not Princeton taxpayers should continue to subsidize the attendance of Cranbury students at the high school, and whether Cranbury taxpayers will bear any of the cost of the high school expansion necessitated by overcrowded conditions.
- Even in the highly unlikely event PPS does not intend to implement the banked \$800,000 tax increase or to impose further and much greater tax increases based on enrollment exceeding its prior projections, the proposed expansion represents a 1% change in costs. Such a modest impact is a legally insufficient basis to deny PCS’s application, and by no means can it be characterized by any honest public official as a “serious perhaps potentially ruinous threat to the school district as we know it,” as one PPS board member has chosen to describe it. For those new to Princeton within the last eight years, this is the same refrain PPS has resorted to time and again since the founding of PCS in 1997. Yet for the past twenty years, the district has thrived despite - and indeed, because of - PCS. Each year, 85-90% of PCS students go on to become academic and extracurricular leaders contributing to the excellent reputation of

Princeton High School. Meanwhile, the district has spent millions on a pool, a new locker room, field turf, the conversion of a gym to a media center, and many other projects not central to the primary purpose of public schools, at the considerable expense of driving less fortunate families and retirees out of town as a result of the ever increasing PPS tax levy.

- The district has a healthy per pupil expense that is several thousands of dollars above the per pupil expense of local districts with similar or better academic performance (see 3 below).

Here are some details that should address recent questions, and illustrate the basic errors that manipulate the numbers so dramatically in the December 13 presentation. This is a complex funding formula and, as such, is very difficult to simply and clarify. As a result, it lends itself to manipulation.

Cost figures:

The presentation rests on several clearly unwarranted manipulations plainly designed to mislead in view of the presenter’s claimed familiarity and expertise in this area:

- The presenter removes the cost of PCS from the PPS cost per pupil, but does not remove the weighted number of PCS students from the divisor in calculating the per pupil cost for PPS to educate those students it does serve. Correcting this error alone increases the PPS cost per pupil from \$17,825 to **\$19,488.**
- The presenter removed all Special Education spending from PPS costs, by some \$14,135,166. Yet, the presenter did not subtract the number of PPS Special Education students from the divisor when calculating the per pupil cost. PPS has a 505 students whose costs are covered by the \$14million that was removed by the presenter for special education. Correcting this error increases the PPS per pupil cost from \$19,488 to **\$23,082.**
- The presenter removed the cost of Special Education from the PPS budget number in calculating the per pupil cost for PPS, but did not remove the commensurate cost for PCS, stating that she could not find them in our CAFR. Removing the cost of Special Ed for PCS lowers the PCS per pupil cost to \$13,217.
- The claim that PCS’s budget has been increasing in recent years is patently false. Unlike PPS, PCS has succeeded in meeting rising costs without increasing our per pupil budget for eight years. We have had the same budget per pupil in state and local funding since the 2008-2009 School Year: \$15,399. See last five years “Grand Totals” from state funding reports; total budget variances reflect minor differences in the total enrollment counts:

Year	“Grand Total”	Final enrollment
2011-2012	\$5,278,258	(345 students)
2013-2014	\$5,282,830	(344.4 Students)
2014-2015	\$5,325,565	(347.2 Students)
2014-2015	\$5,333,359	(347.7 Students)
2016-2017	\$5,337,918	(348 Students)

From "State Department of Education Division of Field Services, Office of School Finance" reports.

e. The current cost to the taxpayers of Princeton for the Charter School is:

\$4,691,920	from local tax levy (\$4,952,634 - \$261K in State equalization aid for PCS Special Education that flows through the PPS budget.)
\$13,217	Per pupil (Divided by weighted per pupil=\$4,691,920 /355)

Other important PPS cost-related items:

1. Full time district employees for PPS grew in the last 10 years by **130** employees, from 563 to 693. (From 2015-16 PPS CAFR, p. 116)

The number of students enrolled in Princeton Public Schools increased by **198** students from 3,355 to 3,553 in the last 10 years. (From 2015-16 PPS CAFR, p. 117)

This is an increase of 130 PPS employees to serve an increase of 198 students.

2. Cranbury students make up approximately 260 of the students attending Princeton High School. Cranbury residents have not contributed to the cost of any debt service for bonds issued in support of PPS school facilities in the past, nor will they participate in any future loan service costs for construction of facilities to address the overcrowding at the high school. Yet PPS chooses to build more and increase the already costly subsidy of Cranbury taxpayers by the Princeton taxpayers it is elected to serve.
3. Updated: PCS is listed as **5.2%** of the PPS total budget (p.19 of the 2015-16 PPS Comprehensive Financial Report), and we educate **8.9%** of the total publically educated students in Princeton. This is a reduction from the figure previously reported in PPS's 2014-15 CAFR cited in our prior FAQ document.
4. PPS spending compared to other districts: Relative to its peer school districts, PPS remains the most costly of the top five performing districts in New Jersey in recent rankings in which PPS was ranked number 1. A simple analysis of per pupil spending (based on dividing total spending, not including debt burden, by total enrollment as reported by each for 2016-17) shows that PPS taxes and spends at a significantly higher amount than the other top districts, which are of similar size, educate similar students, and achieve similar outcomes:

Princeton:	\$21,341
West Windsor:	\$19,470
Montgomery:	\$18,645
Millburn:	\$18,341
Chatham:	\$15,871

Important data regarding School Performance

The PPS Board accepted without question or inquiry manipulated academic performance comparisons that its expert admitted she could not explain, that were not determined by the state, and that have no credibility or external acceptance.

To avoid any doubt, the state’s process for gathering academic performance data concerning student performance and growth that allows for an apples to apples comparison of schools that have different student populations is the student growth percentile (SGP) methodology, which measures student growth year over year in a way that accounts for ‘starting gate’ inequalities. By comparing a student’s achievement outcomes to a group of students that had similar achievement in the prior year(s), it is possible to measure how much growth a student demonstrated relative to students with a similar test score history or academic peer group. These are the official measures used by the State to compare school performance, and are not skewed or dissembled as were the data presented at PPS’s December 13, 2016 board meeting.

By these official, apples to apples measures, PCS outperforms 99% of all public schools statewide, and 100% of its peer (similar) schools in Math Growth.

Likewise, PCS outperforms 89% of all schools statewide, and 94% of its similar peer schools, in Language Arts Growth, as reflected in the charts on the following pages.

Here are the numbers available through the State DOE website; complete NJSPR results and interpretive guides can be found at <https://homerom5.doe.state.nj.us/pr/>:

Princeton Charter School				
	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	64	94	89	35
Math	77	100	99	35

John Witherspoon School				
	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	42	17	28	35
Math	49	26	52	35

Community Park				
	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	48	44	40	35
Math	42	14	26	35

Littlebrook				
	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	59	47	73	35
Math	64	74	83	35

Johnson Park				
	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	68	100	93	35
Math	63	81	82	35

Riverside				
	School Wide	Peer Percentile	Statewide Percentile	Statewide Target
Language Arts	52	47	53	35
Math	55	44	60	35