



February 24, 2025

Pittsburgh Public Schools
Board of Directors
341 South Bellefield Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Via E-Mail

**RE: VOTE NO ON ANTI-DEMOCRATIC AND UNPROVEN STUDENT OUTCOMES
FOCUSED GOVERNANCE (“SOFG”)**

Dear Board of Directors:

We, 412 Justice, the Education Rights Network, the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, and the Advancement Project,¹ urge the Board of Directors of Pittsburgh Public Schools (“the Board”) to **vote NO on the 000 Series Policy Revisions for Consideration** a.k.a. Student Outcomes Focused Governance policy proposal (“SOFG Proposal”).² The SOFG Proposal strips parents, guardians, teachers, staff, and community members from having a say in their public schools. Members of the Board must choose community over consultants and vote NO on the 000 Series Policy Revisions for Consideration.

I. Student Outcomes Focused Governance is Anti-Democratic and Anti-Community

SOFG³ is a corporate-style school board governance model marketed to school boards across the country by consultant AJ Crabill and the Council of Great City Schools. The model is fundamentally anti-democratic because it severely restricts the public’s ability to provide input and feedback into decision-making and limits the policy-making power of the elected officials who the community voted into office.

¹ Advancement Project is a national racial justice organization committed to supporting communities fighting to keep their neighborhood public schools and working to ensure that our nation’s children are cared for and provided the robust, liberatory education that they deserve. For 25 years, AP has documented and pioneered efforts to end the school-to-prison pipeline and fought for true education justice in our public schools.

² The 000 Series Policy Revisions for Consideration are available [here](#) in clean and redlined versions.

³ To view the framework marketed nationwide and is institutionalized in school board policies, as in the SOFG Proposal here in Pittsburgh, see Council of the Great City Schools and Airick Journey Crabill, Student Outcomes Focused Governance Manual, <https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/4/StudentOutcomesFocusedGovernanceManual.pdf>.



As Saint Paul, Minnesota school board member, Uriah Ward, recounted after he attended an SOFG training and his board considered and rejected an SOFG proposal:

SOFG is anti-democratic. This was the first thing I noticed when I participated in the SOFG cohort. It's a claim that SOFG advocates will strongly disagree with. This model encourages boards to do thorough community engagement and to create student outcomes goals that are based on the feedback gathered. That's a great idea. But the way they do it is problematic.

Boards must make certain all of the goals they create are 'student outcomes goals.' This means that every goal must be about something that students know and are able to do. It's not bad at all to have goals focused on student outcomes, but there are a whole host of things that communities expect from their boards that are not allowed under this framework.

More than limiting Board goal setting, SOFG limits Boards' actual policy making power to an incomplete set of "student outcomes"—*i.e.* standardized test scores. This is problematic because, as Ward explains,

Student outcomes tend to be things you can measure with standardized test scores. When we expressed skepticism of standardized tests, we were told that we could use something else to measure student outcomes. However, we were never given examples of what an alternative might be. I've seen other districts ask the same question in several settings and none have been given an answer.

...

School safety isn't a student outcome. Culturally-welcoming schools aren't a student outcome. Small class sizes aren't a student outcome. Healthy school lunches aren't a student outcome. So many things that our community will ask us for are not considered student outcomes.

So how are members of the community supposed to advocate for these things? . . . SOFG prevents school boards from holding their



district accountable to community concerns. This might improve the job stability for administrators, but it creates conditions in which corruption can flourish and the community can be ignored.⁴

The dynamic that Ward describes is also present in the SOFG Proposal that the Board is considering. For instance, by automatically placing all topics on the legislative consent agenda, prohibiting discussion of any items on the consent agenda unless three board members vote to take it off, and nowhere providing for amendments to consent agenda items, the [proposed changes to Policy 007](#) effectively prohibit a Board Director from responding to concerns raised by the community at a Public Hearing or through other communication.

Furthermore, the proposed changes to Policy 007 prohibit Board Directors from voting on “all matters involving individuals or organizations who made campaign contributions to them.” This means that any labor-backed candidate could not vote on employment or union contract decisions, and accordingly those decisions would be made exclusively by Board members who were not supported by unions. This is an explicit attempt to silence progressive Board members and bias collective bargaining agreements against labor.

We want the elected members of the Board to be accountable to us—the community and the voters. Restricting what Board members are allowed to discuss at meetings is anti-democratic and an attempt to silence Board members who were elected to be a voice of the community.

II. SOFG is Unproven

There is *no evidence* that SOFG has a positive impact on students or their educational outcomes, which is ironic because this framework purports to be singularly focused on improving student outcomes (*i.e.* standardized test scores). Despite this lack of evidence, school boards across the country—boards often strapped for cash—are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on SOFG coaching. Employing the sales rhetoric that “Student outcomes don’t change until adult behaviors change,”⁵ SOFG preys on many school board members’ real desires to do right by their communities while offering a solution that only further harms school communities.

The basic premise of SOFG is that school boards should not be “wasting” time discussing anything not related to student “outcomes”—exclusively defined as standardized test scores and graduation

⁴ Uriah Ward, A Critique of Student Outcomes Focused Governance (SOFG) (Oct. 21, 2024), <https://medium.com/@uriahstp/a-critique-of-student-outcomes-focused-governance-sofg-1168112219c3>.

⁵ See <https://studentoutcomesfocused.org/> for the framework and coaching model referenced here.



rates⁶—even if there are other issues that community members want addressed. Under SOFG, school boards act like corporate boards and hand over all decisions unrelated to standardized test scores to unelected superintendents.

Ironically, and absurdly, to reach the “mastery” level in SOFG, Boards are instructed to measure progress by judging whether they spend 50% of meeting time discussing “student outcomes”—a.k.a. standardized testing—goals. Boards are instructed to complete a “[Board Time Use Evaluation](#)”—which requires someone to comb through “the agendas, minutes, . . . of every non-closed meeting authorized by the school board or board chair during the months being evaluated” and literally count up the time spent discussing issues not related to “student outcomes,” which again are defined narrowly as standardized test scores. Of course, many issues related to the needs of students, staff, and school communities—extracurricular programs, school lunches, and staff positions, to name a few—are not related to test scores. But instead of addressing those concerns, board members are instructed to spend hours combing through old board minutes to fill in this chart.

III. Adopting the SOFG Proposal Could Expose the Board to Legal Liability

To begin with, the [SOFG Proposal](#) flies in the face of the well-settled and well-understood premise in Pennsylvania education law that while it is the Commonwealth’s Constitutional obligation to provide for the education of its students, the bulk of education policymaking rests in local democratic control via *local school boards*. As the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania recently clarified, “The Court does not question the importance of local control” and “certain powers are reserved for local school boards.” *William Penn Sch. Dist. v. Pennsylvania Dep’t of Educ.*, 294 A.3d 537, 961 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2023).

Moreover, Pennsylvania law explicitly requires school board members to make decisions related to a range of topics that do not concern standardized test scores—from maintaining a labor force to run the schools and responding in a transparent manner to the requests and recommendations of the community members and voters who elected them into office. *See generally*, 24 Penn. Stat. Art. V. Duties and Powers of Boards of School Directors (§ 5-501–28). The topics explicitly named include, but are not limited to the maintenance of building facilities, delivery of meals to students, student athletic and extracurricular programs, and taxing residents. *See generally, id.*

These topics that Pennsylvania law explicitly designated as duties and powers of school boards do not directly involve “student outcomes” (exclusively defined by SOFG as standardized test scores).

⁶ Because graduation rates are a metric that is only applicable to a subset of district students, this letter primarily references standardized test scores when discussing “student outcomes” as defined by SOFG.



Therefore, under the SOFG proposal those topics would automatically be placed on the consent agenda, *see* [Proposed Policy 007](#), which could prohibit Board members from discussing them at the Legislative meeting, possibly in contravention of Pennsylvania law. *See* 24 P.S. § 5-508. Further, [Proposed Policy 006](#) would eliminate the Board’s Education Committee, Business/Finance Committee, and Personnel Committee, leaving the Board unable to “oversee” those items and potentially limiting their authority to “take action” on them as required by Pennsylvania law. *See* 24 P.S. § 5-508. And finally, the SOFG proposal would strip the Board of its ability to ensure that the superintendent’s policymaking and operational decisions are responsive to community needs. Specifically, [Proposed Policy 004](#) would replace the clear requirement that the superintendent “[s]hare with the Board all communications both verbal and written . . . directed to the [s]uperintendent by any person and which related to matters of importance in the operation of the School District,” with a vague statement that the superintendent need only “[c]ommunicate effectively with the Board information related to matters of importance.”

Furthermore, the SOFG Proposal could directly conflict with Board members’ statutory obligation to “take action” on the topics listed under Pennsylvania Article V (§ 5-501–28) by removing 1) the requirement that the Policy Committee “develop[] . . . policies that reflect student, family, staff, and community needs and address state and federal regulations,” *see* [Proposed Policy 006](#), and 2) the Board’s authority to create a standing committee, in which Board members would otherwise be able to meet to discuss decisions regarding any of the topics listed in Section 5-508. *See id.*; 24 P.S. § 5-508.

By contrast, Article V of the Pennsylvania School Code, § 10-1081, sets out the “duties of district superintendents[::]”

Visit personally as often as practicable the several schools under his supervision, to note the courses and methods of instruction and branches taught, to give such directions in the art and methods of teaching in each school as he deems expedient and necessary, and to report to the board of school directors any insufficiency found, so that each school shall be equal to the grade for which it was established and that there may be, as far as practicable, uniformity in the courses of study in the schools of the several grades, and such other duties as may be required by the board of school directors.

Notably, Section 10-1081 also provides that the “superintendent shall have a seat on the board of school directors of the district, and the right to speak on all matters before the board, *but not to*



vote.” Thus, it appears that the superintendent may not be permitted to take on roles and responsibilities that are specifically delegated to the Board under Pennsylvania law.

The SOFG Proposal could also conflict state open meeting laws that allow constituents to observe the Board’s decision-making process and promote government transparency and accountability. Specifically, the Pennsylvania Sunshine Act “contains an express Legislative finding ‘that the right of the public to be present at all meetings of agencies and to witness the deliberation, policy formulation and decisionmaking of agencies is vital to the enhancement and proper functioning of the democratic process.’” *McGrath v. Bd. of School Directors of the City of Scranton*, 2020 WL 5904514, at *6 (Pa.Com.Pl. Oct. 04, 2020) (quoting 65 Pa. C.S. § 702(a)). Delegating the elected Board’s “policy formulation and decisionmaking” to the superintendent is contrary to the spirit of the Sunshine Act and may even be contrary to the Act itself.

The Sunshine Act affirms “the right of [Pennsylvania] citizens to have notice of and the right to attend all meetings of agencies at which any agency business is discussed or acted upon as provided in the statute.” *Trib Total Media, Inc. v. Highlands Sch. Dist.*, 3 A.3d 695, 699 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2010); *see also* 65 Pa.C.S. § 703 (“agency” includes school boards). Yet at the Policy Workshop on January 6, 2025, Board Director Jamie Piotrowski suggested that Pennsylvania citizens have not been noticed of all meetings where business was discussed. Specifically, she stated that, “[w]e’ve discussed [the SOFG Proposal] at length many times in pre-committee and at least once at a retreat or something so the Board has seen this many times at this point, we’ve had a lot of discussion on it.”⁷

For these reasons and possibly more, the members of the Board should exercise restraint and refrain from adopting a policy proposal that might expose the Board to legal liability.

IV. SOFG Will Not Bring about the Solutions that We Need

Uriah Ward, the school board member from Saint Paul, Minnesota, which considered and rejected a SOFG proposal, articulated well why many board members who care about young people are drawn to the SOFG model:

SOFG accurately diagnoses many of the problems facing school districts and the boards that govern them. It is true that too many boards fail to set meaningful goals that challenge the district to deliver better outcomes for students. It is true that boards spend too

⁷ See Pittsburgh Public Schools, Policy Workshop - January 6, 2025 at 10:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnnKf-wpTmM>.



little time talking about how their students are doing. It is true that urban districts across the country are plagued by short terms for superintendents, making it difficult for them to build the kind of change that takes time. It is true that dysfunctional boards can make it incredibly difficult for a district to make significant improvements for students. Where SOFG errs is in its solutions to the concerns it raises.

There are times when I express skepticism about SOFG when others will argue that we cannot continue not to do anything. I agree. When I critique SOFG, I do not argue for status quo. . . . SOFG is not the only transformational model that school boards might consider. And given its anti-democratic bent, school boards and the communities they serve should be very wary of it.⁸

Saying no to SOFG would provide Board Directors with the opportunity to chart a new course, prioritize input of the community that elected them into office, and make governance changes that actually make sense for the PPS community. By contrast, adopting this expensive, wasteful, anti-democratic SOFG Proposal will destine PPS to an unresponsive corporate school board and no promise of actual improved outcomes.

V. Vote NO on Each of the 000 Series Policy Revisions

In addition to all the reasons above, we urge the Board to vote no on each proposed revision that are harmful to our democracy, schools, and community for the following reasons.

Vote NO on the Revisions to Policy 001, Item 8.01. These changes state that “[t]he Goals established by the Board for Pittsburgh Public Schools shall be the first priority for resource allocation,”⁹ which would prioritize resources for the Superintendent’s standardized test score and graduation rate goals at the expense of any other student needs or priorities expressed by the community.¹⁰

⁸ Uriah Ward, A Critique of Student Outcomes Focused Governance (SOFG) (Oct. 21, 2024), <https://medium.com/@uriahstp/a-critique-of-student-outcomes-focused-governance-sofg-1168112219c3>.

⁹ See Proposed Changes to Local Board Procedures 001, <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1736270505/pghschoolsorg/v88tzmlnmfwf3hw0qf7v/PPS001RedlinedChanges.pdf>.

¹⁰ See Superintendent Walters, Student Outcome Goals, [https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/pghboe/Board.nsf/files/D8CTR6789251/\\$file/Superintendent%20Walters%20Student%20Outcomes%20and%20Priority%20Goals.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/pghboe/Board.nsf/files/D8CTR6789251/$file/Superintendent%20Walters%20Student%20Outcomes%20and%20Priority%20Goals.pdf).



Vote NO on the Revisions to Policy 003, Item 8.02. These changes would require the Board to “establish student outcome goals”—standardized test score goals—rather than “educational” goals.¹¹ The Board must not focus only on standardized testing goals at the expense of all other educational goals. Students and their families deserve so much more holistic, well-rounded, and enriching school experience.

Vote NO on the Revisions to Policy 004, Item 8.03. These changes would eliminate the Board’s critical oversight over the superintendent, which would allow corruption or poor leadership to go unchecked.¹² As discussed above, this is a mechanism for stripping the Board’s policymaking authority and the public’s ability to have a say in our public schools.

Vote NO on the Revisions to Policy 005, Item 8.04. These changes would require Board Directors to undergo an additional, redundant, and wasteful training that would only serve to indoctrinate incoming Directors with the unproven SOFG message.

Vote NO on the Revisions to Policy 006, Item 8.05. These changes would eliminate the Board’s Education Committee, Business/Finance Committee, and Personnel Committee. They would also remove the directive for the Policy Committee to “develop[] . . . policies that reflect student, family, staff, and community needs and address state and federal regulations.”¹³ These changes are yet another anti-democratic delegation of the Board’s policy making power, which would leave the superintendent to govern himself with no accountability to the community he serves and could conflict with Pennsylvania state law.

¹¹ See Proposed Changes to Local Board Procedures 003, <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1736270505/pghschoolsorg/azgdd8yhioyqe2h0yqyd/PPS003RedlinedChanges.pdf>.

¹² For instance by eliminating the requirement that the Superintendent “Share with the Board all communications both verbal and written which are directed to the Superintendent by any person and which related to matters of importance in the operation of the School District” and by removing the authority of the Policy Committee to oversee ‘District’ Policy. See Proposed Changes to Local Board Procedures 004, <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1736270505/pghschoolsorg/wevlcaotvln4ok4v1p8u/PPS004RedlinedChanges.pdf>.

¹³ See Proposed Changes to Local Board Procedures 006, 2.b, <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1736270505/pghschoolsorg/fv1ppuk4kyz52aoihswk/PPS006RedlinedChanges.pdf>.



Vote NO on the Revisions to Policy 007, Item 8.06. These changes would severely restrict what Board members may discuss at a Legislative Meeting.¹⁴ Specifically, to trigger deliberation of any item on the consent agenda, this revision would require that a Board Director submit a written question at least four days before the Agenda Review Meeting and that three Board Directors request in writing that an item be pulled from the Legislative Meeting consent agenda by 5:00 pm the day before the vote.¹⁵ Each Board Director was elected by us, they represent us, and they must not be silenced at the Legislative Meeting prior to a vote. Additionally, current policy already has strong Board conflict of interest language, and language taken directly from the SOFG Governance Manual is unnecessary and deserves high scrutiny given the aforementioned issues with the SOFG framework.

Vote NO on the Revisions to Policy 009, Item 8.07. These changes would institutionalize the unproven SOFG framework into the Board’s written policy. Specifically, these changes would, *inter alia*, eliminate the Board’s duty to adopt a master facilities plan, professional development plan, or plan for curriculum review and development.¹⁶ This would allow the superintendent to implement a facilities plan—to *close schools*—without a Board vote.

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¹⁴ For instance, the SOFG proposal would default to initially placing “all items” on the consent agenda, which would be “action items [for which] school directors do not wish to devote discussion time at the Board Meeting.” See Proposed Changes to Local Board Procedures 007, <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1736270505/pghschoolsorg/quqjjoyx2jz881uxbryh/PPS007RedlinedChanges.pdf>.

¹⁵ *Id.* (. . . “items can be pulled from the consent agenda for a separate vote if a written question was submitted no later than four days before the board meeting and three Directors request that the item be pulled for separate consideration by 5:00pm on the day before the Board meeting.”).

¹⁶ See Proposed Changes to Local Board Procedures 009, 4.f--i, <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1736270506/pghschoolsorg/hwtrtvajrcqjbt9idaut/PPS009RedlinedChanges.pdf>.



For all the aforementioned reasons, we urge the members of the PPS Board of Directors to **VOTE NO** on the 000 Series Policy Revisions for Consideration.

Sincerely,

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412 Justice

Laura Petty
Staff Attorney, Opportunity to Learn
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Moirá Kaleida
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