



Testimony Presented to School District of Philadelphia School Board
Symbol Lai, Philadelphia Mobilization and Policy Director
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Good evening, members of the school board. My name is Symbol Lai. I'm here for Children First.

Last year before the school board voted on the facilities plan, I testified to urge the school board to Do No Harm in its rollout of the facilities plan.

Amid heated debates about shifting demographics, under enrollment, school closures and co-locations, and cost, we urged the District to adopt policies that centered students who will be living through the changes set to begin next year.

Doing No Harm meant putting together a plan that details how the District will achieve its stated goals of improving academic performance and expanding extracurricular activities. The plan should speak to the investments the District needs as well as to the District's support of impacted students.

We asked the District to adopt four guarantees before closing or co-locating schools. They were:

- Clear, timely communication and support to impacted families.
- Enrollment protections, which includes priority access to the school selection process and automatic individualized reviews for students whose schools closed.
- Transition plans for students with disabilities.
- Increased mental health supports like transition plans for students receiving services and additional resources at sending and receiving schools.

I'm here tonight to remind the board of these guarantees and to ask the District put them in place as it stands up the Office of Transition and takes steps to close and co-locate schools in SY 2027.

Everyone in this room will agree that the school closures we saw in 2013 traumatized a generation of students and their communities.

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Everyone in this room wants to learn from the past to do better. A study examining the impact of the 2013 closures – the one you have before you - shows that student well-being depended on the culture and climate of the schools where they landed.

- Students who moved to higher-performing schools made gains in achievement.
- Students that went to schools where there were large numbers of other displaced students - students that lacked the supports to facilitate their transition - experienced worse outcomes.
- Absenteeism increased after a school closed and students who had to travel further to a new school had more absences and suspensions.

No one in this room wants to see these outcomes for our students, and so tonight I'm urging the board to think not just about advancing a facilities plan, but about how that plan impacts the experiences of Philly students. Adopt a Do No Harm framework with firm guarantees in place. Intervene in what we know will happen when young people are forced to weather big disruptions from being displaced from their school communities.

Thank you for your time.