

Chicago: 16 more public schools slated for closures, cuts

Clement Daly
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Chicago school officials voted on Wednesday to close, consolidate, or vastly restructure 16 public schools beginning in the fall. The decision reflects not only the devastating impact of the economic crisis on the public school system, but also the efforts of the Democrat-dominated political establishment to replace publicly funded education with private, for-profit schools.

The Chicago Public School (CPS) district is the third largest school system in the US, serving some 408,000 students in 650 schools. In the past few years, over 60 of the city's public schools have been shuttered, forcing thousands of families to transport their children to schools outside of their communities or turn to newly opened charter schools. With the latest round of cuts, more than 10 percent of the city's public schools will have been closed in the past eight years.

The closures are part of the CPS's "Renaissance 2010" initiative, through which city officials have aggressively pursued the development of charter schools, along with attacks on teachers' wages and job security. Some of the most impoverished areas of the city have borne the brunt of the closings, while they have received little in the way of improved facilities.

Since 2005, 76 new schools have been created or transformed according to the Renaissance 2010 plan—43 charter schools, 25 performance schools, and 8 contract schools. More than a third of these Renaissance schools are in 18 communities not considered to be top priority. Ten communities have seen no new Renaissance schools.

The Bush administration's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001 set the stage for the development of Renaissance 2010 plan, introduced in June 2004. The plan calls for the creation of 100 new schools by 2010 through closures and "transformations" of schools with low enrollment or deemed as underperforming. The closed schools are replaced with smaller, charter schools, the majority of which are not only exempt from some of the state's regulations, but refuse to hire union members as well.

The principles of the plan follow closely those laid out in a report entitled, *Left Behind: Student Achievement in Chicago's Public Schools*. The report was produced in July 2003 by the

Commercial Club of Chicago, an historic group of Chicago's most wealthy and powerful capitalists founded in 1877. Less than a year latter, Chicago's Democratic Mayor Richard M. Daley heeded the advice through the Renaissance 2010 initiative.

What the NCLB legislation, *Left Behind*, and the Renaissance 2010 initiative all share is a contempt for everything not subordinated to the principles of the free market and subjugated to the profit motive, an ignorance of the social reality faced by millions of working Americans, and a cynical attempt to hold teachers, administrators, students and parents accountable for the collapse of public education.

The closure of underperforming schools, many of which are located in the most impoverished sections of the city, has been bound up with Daley's overall drive at the gentrification of these areas. Coupled with the destruction of public housing projects and spiraling rent rates in these areas, the school closings are forcing low-income residents out of the city.

The displacement resulting from the school closures has had a devastating effect on students and teachers alike. One study conducted by *Catalyst*, an independent publication that follows school reform issues, found that only 2 percent of the students who were displaced by school closings were enrolled the next fall in new Renaissance schools.

Furthermore, nearly half of the displaced students landed at schools that were on academic probation. To address this crisis, the CPS has implemented a so-called turnaround strategy, which merely allows students to stay while the district carries out wholesale firings of staff and shuffles in new teachers and principals.

In an attempt to delay Wednesday's scheduled vote, the Grassroots Education Movement has released the results of two recent studies, one of which has found that Latino and African-American students have been most affected by the school closures. In addition, the newly founded charter high schools were found to enroll fewer low-income students, nearly half as many limited English speakers, and "significantly fewer" students with special needs than the neighborhood high schools. Other reports indicate a lack of representative diversity in the magnet schools, the district's most-established schools of choice.

According to the CPS, in the 2007-2008 school year a staggering 83.6 percent of Chicago public school students come from low-income families. The intensification of the economic crisis since then has no doubt exacerbated the financial distress felt by the city's working class families, pushing more into poverty, foreclosure, and unemployment. One indication of the increasing social misery facing these students is expressed in the recent revelation that at least 10,642 public school kids in Chicago are homeless (See "Over ten thousand public school students homeless in Chicago")

According to the Consortium on Chicago School Research, which tracks individual students, just over half—55 percent—of CPS high school students graduated in 2008. In 2007, less than one third of those who graduated enrolled in college.

Recent years have also seen the city's students engulfed in an explosion of violence. Last school year saw 26 city students killed, 23 of which died from gunshot wounds. The lives of an additional 12 CPS students were taken in violence over the summer. Following the recent string of fights and shootings at sporting events, the CPS now requires all varsity games to be played no later than 4 p.m. as well as the pre-approval of all visiting fans by the host school.

It is within this context of deterioration and chaos that Daley recently appointed Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) President Ron Huberman to replace outgoing Chicago Public School's chief Arne Duncan as the new CEO of the CPS. Duncan left to become President Obama's US Education Secretary.

Daley's appointment of Huberman has been criticized by residents and educational leaders as being politically motivated. Like Duncan, the politically connected Huberman will take over one of the biggest public school systems in the country without having any previous professional experience in education. Before his appointment to the CTA, Huberman was a police officer in the Chicago Police Department, rising to the rank of assistant deputy superintendent.

Duncan's departure raised the hope among many Chicagoans that a new executive officer would break with corporate-style administration policies in general, and the controversial Renaissance 2010 initiative in particular. However, it is clear that Daley appointed Huberman as a reliable successor to Duncan, one who will oversee the completion of the plan.

Faced with widespread opposition from parents, students, and teachers to the latest round of school closures, Huberman announced on Tuesday that the CPS was removing six schools from the list of those targeted. Officials explained that the schools had been evaluated incorrectly in terms of enrollment and space utilization.

In light of the decision, questions naturally arise as to the evaluations of the dozens of other schools that have been closed since 2001. How many other schools have been 'misevaluated'?

According to CPS data, since 2002, 32 schools have been

forced to close after being characterized as underutilized by the district, which calculates potential classroom capacity by an absurdly high 30:1 student-to-teacher ratio.

Philo Carpenter Elementary, one of the schools that remains slated for closure by September, was evaluated by the CPS as having a space utilization rate of only 23 percent. However, a study released earlier this month from the University of Illinois-Chicago found that the district's assessment did not take into account the government-mandated class-size limits for the nearly 100 students with disabilities at the school who receive special services. Nor did the CPS consider the space required to teach the high proportion of students learning English as a second language as being adequately utilized. The school has a high percentage of hearing-impaired students and an integrated arts program that the UIC study described as a "model of inclusion."

The UIC study points out that the schools into which disabled students will be shuffled have not been equipped to accommodate them: "The proposed receiving schools are not equipped in the same ways to serve Carpenter's students with disabilities and are likely to impinge on students' lawful rights to a quality education in the least restrictive environment... the utilization report makes no mention of the financial expenditures that will be necessary to accommodate these students in any proposed receiving schools."

"Research shows that small school size and a caring community are elements that contribute positively to student success," the study notes. "It seems that CPS is proposing to close the very type of school that it claims communities should strive for."

The full UIC report, "Data and Democracy Project: Investing in Neighborhoods—Examining CPS' plan to close, phase out, consolidate, turn-around 22 schools" is available here in PDF.



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