

Britain: Sheffield City Council votes to close Abbeydale Grange School

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On July 8, Sheffield City Council voted to close Abbeydale Grange secondary school in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. The vote was approved by a cabinet meeting of the Liberal Party-led council. The school currently has around 600 pupils.

Prior to the city council meeting, parents and supporters held a demonstration outside the Town Hall to demand the council keep the school open. Also attending the rally were former pupils.

The council cabinet, under the leadership of Sheffield Liberal Party leader Paul Scriven, voted to shut the school despite many at times impassioned written and oral submissions from staff at the school, parents, current and former pupils. One parent said she was considering legal action against the council on the basis that it had not given enough time to find another school willing to partner with Abbeydale Grange.

Another speaker presented a petition with several hundred names, calling on the council to keep the school open. On July 1, campaigners had also handed in a petition with 580 names demanding that the decision to close be delayed.

Under the closure plans, steps will formally begin in September. The school will be finally closed with the buildings vacant in July 2011.

The area in which most students live is one of the most impoverished in Sheffield—30 percent of families are dependent on state welfare payments; 12 percent of adults are diagnosed as suffering from depression and 25 percent of the children live in homes officially deemed to be overcrowded.

Abbeydale Grange School has a long-established reputation for offering a welcoming place for many international students whose families have come to Britain to escape persecution, particularly those from countries involved in civil wars and former colonial nations. The school is a mix of students of many different ethnic and

social backgrounds. It receives a large intake of child refugees and those finding it difficult to cope with the national education curriculum due to issues relating to social deprivation and emotional problems.

In December, the council initiated a review of the school and a “consultation” period. The review followed an Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) Children’s Services and Skills report which “failed” the school—describing it as “inadequate” and criticising the low attainment levels of its pupils. The school was placed into “special measures” by Ofsted in March. Under legislation introduced in the Education Act 2005, schools given “special measures” status are given notice to improve and are reinspected after one year.

On June 10, the council cabinet, setting the stage for its real agenda of closing the school, pushed through its plan for Abbeydale Grange to look for “partner school” in which it would be able to enter a “hard federation.” The council claimed that this process, if successful, would be an alternative to closure. Hard federation legislation was introduced by the Labour government in the Education Act of 2002, as part of its ongoing assault on education. It allowed for two to five schools to share a single governing body.

The Act was stated that “failing” schools—those that low grades in the national league tables—could be taken under the overall control of a “high performing school nearby.”

In a move that was criticised by many staff at the school and parents involved in the campaign to keep Abbeydale Grange open, the council allowed fewer than four weeks for the school to approach possible federation partner schools.

All four schools approached as preferred partners by the council rejected the proposal. The council also said that it had written to all comprehensive schools in the city and all had rejected the idea of federating.

The four preferred schools, Fir Vale, Tapton, King Egbert and Silverdale, each cited concerns about the impact a “hard federation” with Abbeydale Grange would have on their own schools.

In a stark indication of the ethos of competition among schools, which has become the status quo under the Labour government, two of the four schools stated their agreement with the plan to close Abbeydale Grange. Fir Vale's head teacher, Lesley Bowes, wrote, "As an education professional, my own view is that Abbeydale Grange School should close. Children attending the school should be transferred to their nearest community school."

Tapton School wrote to the council, "If the whole family of secondary schools in Sheffield support the close of Abbeydale, then a rapid absorption phase would lead to all students having the prospect of real success, a fulfilling and productive future."

Nearby Rotherham Borough Council also rejected a proposal to find a school that would be willing to federate. Catherine Kinsella, the Director of Learning Service at Rotherham Council said, "It is a general view that a school with only 550 pupils on roll is not economically viable."

Kinsella added, "It does not have the financial capacity to attract and sustain the calibre of teachers that would be needed for a school serving the range of pupils described in the prospectus."

Supporters of the campaign to keep the school open have raised concerns as to why £14 million, already allocated to be spent on a refurbishment of the Abbeydale Grange buildings, has been consistently kept back by the council. At the meeting, the council said that the money would be spent on expanding other schools to create more places.

Some of those involved in the campaign suspect that the council plans to sell off the land on which Abbeydale Grange sits as a high-value real estate opportunity.

Prior to the decision, Richard Siday, a parent, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We want to prove to the council that Abbeydale Grange does have a future, and it is a successful school. We have lots of kids that have gone on to Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge. Unfortunately because the council deemed a few years ago that it would close down our sixth form, we don't get the credit for that."

"The school failed its Ofsted for the first time ever. The reason it failed wasn't because of teaching standards, but because of administration issues and staff training."

"We get a lot of kids from other countries. Certainly my kids, if there is anything overtly racist on the TV or anything, they are quite shocked. This is because kids going to Abbeydale Grange are open to lots of cultures. They are growing up thinking racism is wrong, which it is."

"With the Ofsted reports, it's all about getting individual figures on pieces of paper so that they look good. They don't actually think about the individual children. Closing

Abbeydale Grange and shunting the kids off to another school and putting class sizes up to 30 can't be a good thing.

"Also, there is the £14 million sat in a bank somewhere that was allocated to Abbeydale Grange. You have to ask the question, why is that? I believe that is to do with the 51 acres of prime development land at Abbeydale."

"They keep talking about the negative aspects of the school, but look at what it does. The drama department was voted to be one of the best in the country.... I hope the council will see that it is about the kids at the end of the day."

Amy Allen is a former pupil at the school who has just graduated at Longley Sixth Form College. She said, "I don't think they should shut Abbeydale Grange, because when I went there I was very naughty and they changed my life. If it wasn't for the school I would not be going to college and succeeding in my grades now."

"I went to Mexborough first, and they kicked me out. All the teachers at Abbeydale are really good. At Abbeydale, they lock you down and make sure you pass and try to see what else they can do for you. If you notice, this is a very multicultural school. There is so much diversity here."

Judith, a parent, said, "We are here to support the school. We love the school. My child loves the school. He is a high-flying student there. He has one year left. I am speaking up for all the families that haven't got an opportunity to come today."

"We just feel the school hasn't been represented well by the press and the council, who seem determined to pull it down. They are deeming it as a failing school. A lot of children drop out of their chosen school and end up at Abbeydale and do very well there."

Former pupil Dave said, "They shut the sixth-form college a few years and it seems to have been downhill ever since. They have been looking to close it for a while."

"The land is worth tens of millions, and the council will look to sell it off. It seems like a similar situation to what happened to council housing in Sheffield. They decimated social housing stock, and now you have got enormous waiting lists."



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