

New York students and teachers speak out on school closings

A WSWS reporting team
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The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed parents, students and teachers who attended Wednesday night's Panel for Educational Policy vote at Brooklyn Tech High School on the closing of 19 public schools.

Evelyn Rosario teaches at PS 19 on Staten Island and has been a teacher for 11 years. She told the WSWS, "We are here to support our colleagues in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens and Manhattan fighting against the school closures. There are about 80 teachers who came on three buses from Staten Island. The 20 closures are not good for the students. To improve the quality of education, they are supposed to have smaller classrooms, but if they are closing down schools, how will that happen?"

"The charter schools are occupying more of the public schools. Where are the majority of students supposed to go? The charter schools are not for all the kids. They are only for a select few. I think the union should take a stand to stop this. Why have they done nothing about this?"

John, a teacher from Grover Cleveland High School, informed the WSWS about what was news to many at the rally and hearing. He explained that the New York State Department of Education (DOE) was calling for the closing of more schools in New York City and elsewhere.

He said, "The state issued a list of schools last Thursday which had below a 60 percent graduation rate. They told the cities to close the bottom 10 percent of the schools on this list. This means more schools are to be closed in New York City and more across the state. The bulk of the closures are in the big cities.

"In addition to New York City, the closures are scheduled for Rochester, Buffalo, Yonkers, Albany and Roosevelt, Long Island. What bothers us is that Queens is being hit hard because they are ignoring ESL

[English as a Second Language] students who can and do graduate in six years, but cannot graduate in four years. The state doesn't care.

"I don't know that much about it, but I think Obama's Race to the Top program is absurd. I consider the 20 school closures they are about to decide on here for the city, and the 22 more the state is calling for, to be a serious threat to public education, and we should fight them."

Nayim Islam, a senior at Brooklyn Tech High School, told the WSWS, "I am here because I was told about more school closings by a friend who goes to Grover Cleveland High School. Grover Cleveland is one of the schools that may be closed next. At least two schools that were closed in the neighborhood ended up having their students go to Grover Cleveland.

"These students brought the statistics down at their new schools because they are special education or because English isn't their first language. This brings down Grover Cleveland's statistics and makes them look bad on paper. If they close Grover Cleveland, then these students would be sent somewhere else, and the same thing would happen.

"I don't know much about Obama's Race to the Top program, but I think it is terrible to pay teachers based on student test scores, because it just puts pressure on them and the administration to lie about grades.

"It is not the students' fault. It is not as though we are achieving less. The quality of education will continue to decline if the government keeps cutting funds. New York City is cutting money, and it is unfair. I would say this is true for both the Democrats and Republicans. They are both making cuts. I understand they say budgets are limited, but taking money away from schools won't solve anything."

Ms. Harrison, a special education teacher for 11 years

from PS 332 in Brownsville, Brooklyn, told us, “They want to close PS 332 in Brownsville. We had a C rating three years in a row, and our overall quality was ‘proficient.’ They blamed lack of attendance and parent involvement. But we have a high transfer student population. It is a barrier-free school. That means we admit all students.

“The transient population includes students from three homeless shelters. Some try, but you don’t know what to expect from such students since their situation is so changeable. The government in general has to understand that the recession has hit the families hard, and closing the school is just one more issue they have to deal with. Students are asking what will happen to them.”

“We also have a high ELL [English Language Learner] population,” she added. “We had students here—in Brownsville—from Flatbush, and Queens and from many other places. We took budget cuts. Many people’s jobs were cut. The school closing makes no sense. We are not a failing school. Sixty-two percent of the students scored 3 or 4 on the ELA [English Language Achievement test, scored from 1 to 4]. The superintendent told us in early December that we were being closed, without warning. We had an emergency meeting at the school. Many teachers were dismayed and disheartened.”

Roz Panepento, a retired teacher, explained that she was attending the hearing because she was the former UFT chapter leader for five GED programs that had been shut down.

“I am here to speak because the 50 ATRs [Absent Teacher Reserve—teachers left without a position when their schools close and kept on as substitute teachers] created in 2007 are still ATRs. The DOE assured us nothing would happen to our program until April 2007, when they consolidated the five programs into one. In August we had to re-interview for our jobs when they cut the number of positions. None of these teachers were unsatisfactory. There will be more ATRs with the new school closings. Klein has said he wants to terminate teachers with ATR status from the New York City school system.

“There are over a thousand such teachers now, many of whom are not hired because as experienced teachers their salaries will cost more out of a school’s budget.”

Asked about the overall significance of the school closings, Ms. Panepento remarked, “Once you get away from public education, you have eroded democracy.”



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