

New York City: opposition mounts to Bloomberg's closures of public schools

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In citywide public hearings sponsored by the New York City's Department of Education (DOE), parents, teachers and students voiced their anger and opposition to the plans of the DOE to close 20 schools. Dozens of demonstrations have taken place throughout the city to protest the DOE's move.

With virtually no advance notice, the DOE released statements at the beginning of last month notifying each school of the decision to close it down. While no overall rationale or plan for the closings has been released, the schools are being phased out ostensibly because of low rates of four-year graduation and poor performance in other criteria, including the DOE's annual school performance report cards, which are in part based on student scores on standardized tests.

Some of the 20 schools have shown marked improvement even by the DOE's limited and artificial criteria, while others that performed more poorly have not been slated for closure.

Since 2002, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration has closed nearly 100 schools. Most of these are in poorer areas of the city that have seen the largest increase in new charter schools.

The DOE has said that it hopes to replace larger, poorly performing schools with a variety of smaller schools including charter schools.

Often, smaller programs have not had enough seats to absorb all the students who have been displaced.

Smaller schools, moreover, often have few facilities to teach English Language Learners and Special needs students, in spite of legal mandates to give these students equal access to education.

As a result, the neediest students end up attending larger high schools, often depressing their rates of graduation and making them in turn targets for closure.

Charter and smaller schools often select the highest performing students and remove them from the public system. What emerges is a two-tier system, one well funded by private donors, and the other, for the vast majority, underfunded.

These closures are in keeping with the national program spearheaded by the Obama administration's "Race to the Top" program, which seeks to shut public schools, destroy teachers'

salaries and working conditions, and reallocate funding to charter schools.

The DOE's Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) will vote on accepting the proposals for closure at a public meeting on January 26. Hearings sponsored by the PEP have been held at the schools slated for closure.

The PEP is under no obligation to take into account the opinions of the thousands of parents, teachers, students, and alumni who have attended these meetings—overwhelmingly to oppose the shutdowns of the schools.

It is unlikely that it will. The PEP is composed of 13 members, eight of whom have been appointed by the billionaire mayor. Bloomberg has the power to remove these panelists at will.

In recent weeks, protests have taken place at Jamaica High School and Beach Channel HS in Queens, Norman Thomas HS in Manhattan, Maxwell High School and Paul Robeson High School in Brooklyn and at the Alfred E. Smith High School in the Bronx.

The *World Socialist Web Site* attended meetings on the closings at Jamaica High School in Queens on January 7 and Norman Thomas High School for Commerce in Manhattan on January 11.

At Jamaica High School, over 500 parents, teachers, and students turned out to oppose the proposed closing by the DOE. They conducted a spirited rally in front of the building before the session began, and uniformly spoke during the meeting to condemn the closure of the school.

The World Socialist Web Site interviewed a number of those who attended.

Melissa Forgione, a 1972 alumna of Jamaica showed us her graduating yearbook:

"My daughter is a Ninth Grade student at Jamaica, and my husband, mother, and aunt were graduates here and I expected my fifth-grade daughter to go here. Three generations of alumni. It is a terrible thing, if they are willing to ship out these students and select two new schools to join the two schools now in the building, Jamaica High and a charter, Jamaica Collegiate. They would have children of other neighborhoods

and districts to come to this school instead. Our children need the attention. They would be spending to have four principals and spending more money than they do now. Instead they should take it and buy computers.

“They are cutting back, making Jamaica High School look worse so they can cut education. It is about money. Somebody is benefiting, somebody somewhere. If I could put my finger on it, it would probably stink. What happened to the money from the New York State Lottery that was supposed to fund education? Our children are suffering from the mismanagement.”

Melissa’s daughter said: “The program for engineering is going to a contest on Saturday, but we have to pick up the parts and we have to raise the money for this. There are few smart boards or computers for us. But Jamaica Collegiate has it all. Some school. This is absurd”.

Allen Coles, a teacher and track team coach told the WSWs:

“We are one of those schools that have a high number of newly arrived foreign and ESL students who usually take more time to graduate. These new schools do not accept these students. Where will they go once Jamaica is dismantled?”

“My Track team is the defending Outdoor Queen’s Champion for the past five year’s. My athletes have to be academically eligible in order to compete. We go against the cream of the crop as far as high schools in Queens with less than half the enrollment. Our school must be doing something right.

“Due to declining enrollment the DOE cuts our funding making it impossible to even offer evening programs in order to graduate more students. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure this scenario out. We were intentionally targeted to fail.”

At Norman Thomas, over 250 parents, students, teachers and alumni heard a joint panel of the school’s leadership team and representatives of the Department of Education led by John White, Deputy Chancellor of the DOE.

One member of the school’s leadership team spoke of the “terrible effect the closing will have on students.” He observed that the majority of Norman Thomas students will be treated as collateral damage and called the DOE’s decision “a destructive act of educational malfeasance.”

Speakers from the floor universally condemned the closure of the school. Some spoke of an intentional plan by the DOE to make schools fail by packing them with the most at-risk students. One teacher spoke of the increasing racial and ethnic segregation in New York City public schools that was an outcome of school closings.

A math teacher, Kenneth Gross, told the panel that the DOE was “sweeping aside at-risk students”. He noted that “financial rewards would be realized by private interests” because of the DOE’s program. “That’s the real plan: charter schools and only some public education.”

Lloyd B. Jones, a social studies teacher at Norman Thomas

and a teacher for 25 years told the WSWs:

“This school is being closed at a serious time when students must compete in the world. They are being denied the education they deserve. There is an agenda to shut the door on big schools and to privatize education, to undermine and ultimately destroy public education. The agenda is from the rich, powerful business leaders fronted by powerful politicians like Bloomberg. I am a registered Democrat but they are part of the same dysfunctional system.”

At both meetings, a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party and teacher from a Manhattan high school that was closed last year spoke in support of those opposing the school closings.

“It is not the schools that are the failure, but the DOE and the government,” he said.

“We cannot compete as to which school closes. This closing is part of the broad, corporate takeover of public education. This means we are in a political fight and the nature of the politics is key here.

“Not only will this school be closed, not only will school budgets be cut, but hospitals have been closed, subway and bus routes, and even student transportation passes are being cut. And New York is not even the worst hit city.

“These policies come from the top. Obama, the Democrats and Republicans gave \$4.3 billion to push charter schools. They gave trillions for the bailout of the banks and for the war in Afghanistan.

“We are not just fighting to keep Norman Thomas or Jamaica High or any of the other schools to stay open, but to insure that children have a future when they graduate. This means a fight against the capitalist profit system that offers no future.”



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