Harlem School of the Arts shuts down in face of financial crisis

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The Harlem School of the Arts, founded almost 50 years ago as a non-profit institution to provide free or low-cost arts education to mostly black and Hispanic students, has closed its doors after being unable to meet its expenses.

The school's interim director was quoted in the press last week as saying that "we are virtually out of money, with no clear sources ahead of us." The board of the school has said that it is still searching for at least $500,000 in funds to stay open through the end of the current academic semester, but it appears less and less likely that this will take place.

The school has been funded by private donors and city and state grants, in addition to tuition, but many of its students have been awarded partial or full scholarships. For many years, the New York City classical radio station, WQXR, owned by the *New York Times* before it was sold last year, hosted an annual fund-raising drive for the school on a weekend in early spring. The school administration reports that contributions have fallen off drastically since the financial collapse of two years ago.

The current crisis at the Harlem School has been building for some time. Teachers report that pay has regularly been late, and tuition was raised by about 25 percent several years ago. Two weeks ago, it announced that five teachers were being laid off and that other cuts were being made.

The closing of the HSA has a historic as well as a more immediate significance. It has served about 3,000 students annually. Beginning with the teaching of piano in 1964 by noted African-American soprano Dorothy Maynor, it grew over the years and provided training in the disciplines of dance, music, theater and visual arts, with some of its graduates going on to such schools as Juilliard and to careers in film, theater and music.

Dorothy Maynor, who was born in 1910 and died in 1996, was hailed by famous Boston Symphony Orchestra conductor Serge Koussevitsky when he heard her in the late 1930s. Although she had a successful concert career and was considered to be on a musical par with such African-American artists as Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson, her career developed at a time when an unofficial color line prevailed in the major opera houses, an unspoken ban that was broken only in 1955 by Marian Anderson at the Metropolitan Opera.

Maynor's work at the Harlem School was continued by mezzo-soprano Betty Allen, who sang at the New York City Opera and the Metropolitan and who was associated with the school for many years, including as its executive director from 1979 to 1992.

Media accounts report that parents of students at the Harlem School accuse the current administration of financial mismanagement. One news story examines tax records of the school to make a case for mismanagement, as fundraising fell off drastically beginning as early as 2004, while expenses grew.

It may well be that irresponsible management has played a role in the current crisis. The salary of the new president hired in 2006, for instance, was raised by almost 50 percent, to more than $161,000.

There is something more fundamental involved in the latest turn of events, however. The criticisms of school management ignore the more essential causes of the crisis. As a recent letter to the *New York Times* points out, only a few days ago the newspaper printed a story explaining how multimillionaire art and music patrons literally buy themselves seats on the boards of New York's elite arts institutions, pledging as much as $10 million in contributions for the right to determine the

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programming and other vital decisions of these institutions. At the same time, the Harlem School of the Arts is running out of funds and forced to shut down.

The Harlem School never reached more than a small fraction of the working class youth in its neighborhood, and its modest aims never really included anything so ambitious as the elimination of the inequality that is a constant of the capitalist system. Yet even this modest aim of making arts education available to a few thousand students annually can no longer be met by institutions such as these, as the constituency within the ruling elite for such programs dwindles more and more. The cultural education of the working class will not be handed down by the hedge fund managers and bankers, but will only accompany a political awakening of the masses of working people themselves.

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