

Six more Boston public schools threatened with closure

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The superintendent of Boston's public schools has proposed the closure of six more schools and the conversion of a seventh into a privately managed charter school. The move comes amid increasing attacks on public education in the US by federal, state, and municipal governments.

The cuts were announced by Carol Johnson, Boston Public Schools superintendent, at a meeting of the Boston School Committee on October 6. The announcement follows the firing in March of teachers at six "underperforming" Boston schools and a January 2010 state law that allowed a two-fold increase in the number of charter schools in districts with the poorest performance.

The proposed new cuts include the closing of three high schools in Boston's Hyde Park neighborhood, along with two elementary schools and an early learning center.

Superintendent Johnson began her presentation on Wednesday with a quote from Democratic Mayor Thomas Menino, indicating his full support for attacks on public education: "If real reform wins, we can look to a day ... when there will be no wasteful feuding on charter versus pilot versus traditional public. Educators and best practices will move across fading boundaries."

Johnson presented a chart touting the staffing and schedule "flexibilities" available to managers of charter schools; in plain terms, teachers will be made to work longer hours and can be hired and fired at the whim of administrators.

The development of the latest plan was both rushed

and undemocratic. Johnson's presentation to the School Committee boasts that from June to September she and her staff met with more than 150 students and parents, just a small sample of the number of students who will be affected. Public meetings about the plan's details will now be limited to a period of less than a month, and Johnson has requested a formal School Committee vote on the cuts for November 3.

Shortly after the plans were announced, the *Boston Globe* reported that two School Committee members had "questioned whether Johnson was being aggressive enough in closing schools."

The three threatened Hyde Park schools—the Community Academy of Science and Health, the Engineering School, and the Social Justice Academy—are part of one complex in what used to be the Hyde Park High School, and were opened five years ago.

Two days after the planned closure was announced, the *Boston Globe* quoted 16-year-old student Rafael Serrano, "a Social Justice Academy sophomore who has been circulating a petition to keep his school open," as saying, "there are a lot of kids here who have a lot of potential. They should give us a chance.... My teachers are excellent. I give all of them credit. All of them care. I'm saying it from the heart."

Superintendent Johnson's proposals also include turning the Gavin Middle School in South Boston into a charter school called UP Academy. Underscoring the nationwide role of the ruling elite in undermining public education, sitting on the board of directors of Unlocking Potential, Inc., the not-for-profit that would

run the school, is the deputy director of education of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Johnson has touted the use of “in-district” charter schools, which remain in the public school district but are run by private organizations. A June 30 *Boston Globe* article detailed this end run around the teachers’ unions, noting that the January 2010 state law allowed for 14 such schools. The *Globe* added that they “enable the management organization to operate under greater freedom from the teacher union’s contract as it overhauls programs, dismisses teachers.”

At the state level, Massachusetts received a \$250 million Race to the Top (RTTT) grant in August. While providing political ammunition for Democratic Governor Deval Patrick, who has championed charter schools statewide and faces reelection next month, the grant is a pittance compared to what is needed to provide quality education to all Massachusetts children.

The \$250 million in Massachusetts will be spread over four years. In comparison, the *Boston Globe* cites estimates from the Boston Municipal Research Bureau of a \$60 million deficit in the city’s schools budget next year due solely to inflation and teacher raises. The yearly budget for the city’s schools is greater than \$800 million. Statewide, municipal budget shortfalls have been exacerbated by cuts in local aid from the state government.

The local media has fallen in line behind the attack on public schools. The newsweekly *Boston Phoenix* published a September 29 editorial in full support of charter schools and the Obama administration's Race to the Top program.

Obama's RTTT program is being used across the country to blackmail struggling school districts into increasing the privately run charter schools while imposing merit pay and other “performance-based” schemes on teachers and school staff, especially as so-called underperforming schools.

The *Phoenix* column concluded that “the prospect of the Democrats losing either or both houses of Congress is dispiriting, since Republican control would almost

certainly derail the Obama administration's admirable education-reform efforts. Obama and [Massachusetts] Governor Patrick have proven to be two of the best friends Boston students, parents, and teachers could hope for.”

The “staffing flexibility” championed by charter school promoters is damaging both to quality of education and the cohesion of teaching staffs. A 2009 study by David A. Stuit and Thomas M. Smith at Vanderbilt University’s National Center on School Choice found that “25 percent of charter school teachers turned over during the 2003-2004 school year, compared to 14 percent of traditional public school teachers” and that “14 percent of charter school teachers left the profession outright and 11 percent moved to a different school, while 7 percent of traditional public school teachers left the profession and 7 percent moved schools.”

In a survey of journal articles on the subject, the researchers found that high teacher attrition rates damage curricula, professional development plans, relationships between teachers, and norms of practice.



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