

Anger builds in Boston over school closures

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More than 200 parents, teachers, students and administrators attended a community meeting on Saturday at the Frederick Pilot Middle School in Dorchester. The meeting, organized by the superintendent of the Boston Public Schools (BPS), was billed as an opportunity for parents and teachers to voice their opinions on proposed school closings that were announced October 6.

In reality, the meeting was used by Superintendent Carol Johnson and her staff to stifle anger over the closure plan they will be presenting to the Boston School Committee on October 26. The school committee will take a final vote on the closures on November 3.

Slated to close as part of Johnson's "Redesign and Reinvest" plan are the East Zone Early Learning Center, Lee Academy Pilot School, and Roger Clap Elementary, all in Dorchester; Ralph Waldo Emerson Elementary in Roxbury; and three high schools in the Hyde Park neighborhood. The Patrick F. Gavin Middle School in South Boston is to be closed and replaced with the UP Academy, an "in-district" charter school. The closings are scheduled to take place after the end of the current school year.

Parents, students and teachers came prepared to Saturday's meeting to voice their opposition to the closures, but were met with barely disguised contempt by Johnson and her staff. The meeting began with all attendees gathered in the school auditorium to hear opening remarks by the superintendent outlining the shutdown plan. Audience members were told to reserve their comments for smaller "breakout" groups the would take place following the main presentation.

While Johnson claimed to be interested in community input, the "Redesign and Reinvest" plan was presented as a fait accompli, demanded by the district's strapped resources and the siphoning off of students into charter schools. In fact, charter schools have been promoted at

both the state and local levels, with six charter schools poised to open in Boston in 2011.

When several people attempted to speak or ask questions in the main auditorium, they were told to keep quiet. When one teacher from Emerson Elementary attempted to read a statement she had prepared opposing the closure of her school, she was warned by Superintendent Johnson that as a "staff member" she should not disrupt the presentation.

In the process of ramming through the school closures, the superintendent's office has boasted that the decisions on school closings had been guided by "conversations with families" across the district, during which her staff had input from 150 parents this past summer. However, when a parent at Saturdays' event asked for a show of hands of participants in that process, only one hand went up in the entire audience.

When asked to leave the auditorium for the breakout sessions, a number of parents and teachers called out, saying people should remain in the larger group for more discussion, but they were not given the opportunity to put the question to a vote. The crowd was eventually shunted into the "breakout" groups with moderators whose purpose was to water down any opposition.

Johnson has defended her administration's reliance on Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) standardized test results in deciding which schools to close, claiming that they are not "mutually exclusive" with qualitative considerations. However, interviews conducted by WSWs reporters, along with stories in the breakout sessions, belied this assertion, with parents and teachers speaking passionately about the dedication and professionalism of teachers and staff, as well as student achievement at the schools set to close.

Linda Barros came to the meeting with her daughter Sofia, who attends Lee Academy. She told the WSWs,

“Lee Academy is preparing our kids at a young age. In today’s academic world, there are so many challenges, so that they really need to prepare.

“I don’t know where my daughter will go if they close the school. She’s in what they call K-0, she just turned four. I took almost a year to decide where to put her in school, and I decided to put her in a public school, and now this.

“The teachers at Lee Academy are the teachers every parent wants. They put in 130 hours of professional development, 100 more hours than required. When I go to pick up my daughter, she doesn’t want to come home. She has learned so much in the little over a month that she’s been there. I have a big family, and they’re very involved, but we never could have taught her what she’s learned in just a very short time this year.

“Being a pilot school gives the parents a chance to decide how to allocate resources—also what the class sizes should be and who to hire. In my daughter’s class, there are 10 kids and two teachers. It’s one of the best schools, and now they want to close it down?

“The whole way they have handled this process makes me wonder what their real agenda is. Until we set foot in here today, we had no idea how this meeting would be organized. Breaking up into small groups for discussion—I don’t understand it. They see that we are well organized—that’s why.”

Marisol Ramos’s daughter Arianny Ramos also attends Lee Academy. “This meeting would be good,” she said, “if they would listen to the parents. At the meeting at the school, they also broke it up into small groups. The superintendent was also an hour and a half late for it.

“At our school, the teachers are like parents. They are always calling, keeping the parents informed. While the kids are there, you feel safe. When my daughter wakes up on a Saturday, she says, ‘I want to go to school!’ even though it’s the weekend.”

In a breakout session attended by one WSWS reporter, parents accused the moderator of trying to pacify them and of only giving lip service to their concerns. When asked whether her plans had ever been changed by input at such a session, Johnson gave the example of the Greenwood School in Jamaica Plain, which was declared “underperforming” last spring instead of being closed as originally planned.

In line with the Obama administration’s education policy, 12 Boston public schools have been designated as “underperforming” and targeted for “turnaround.” Teachers at six of these schools have already been forced to reapply for their jobs. That this process was held up by Johnson as a positive outcome to a dialogue with the community illustrates the determination to push through these attacks on public education and teachers’ jobs and working conditions.

Another public meeting to discuss the closures is scheduled for Tuesday evening, October 19, in Roxbury. Although billed as a discussion on the proposed high school shutdowns, parents and teachers at Saturday’s meeting on the lower grades said they planned to attend the Tuesday meeting as well.

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