Boston School Committee approves in-district charter schools

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15 November 2010

An offensive is under way in the city of Boston to close schools and establish in-district charter schools. The Boston School Committee, which oversees the supervision of the city's public school system, voted unanimously at a meeting November 3 to convert a middle school and a high school into in-district charter schools.

The decision is part of a so-called "Redesign and Reinvest" plan to close five schools and merge two others at the end of the current school year. The "final proposal" of the plan contained minor changes, such as keeping open the Community Academy of Science and Health (CASH), one of three high schools in the Hyde Park Education Complex (HPEC) originally slated for closure. The plan will be used as a model to make further inroads to undermine public education throughout the city and the state of Massachusetts.

Under the new proposal, CASH will be moved to an as yet unspecified location. The HPEC facility will still be closed and students from the Social Justice Academy and the Engineering School will be forced to study elsewhere.

The Lee Academy Pilot School, slated for closure in the original proposal, is instead to be reconfigured along with Lee Elementary school. The academy, which previously educated grades K through 5, will now accept only K0 through K2 pupils. Lee Elementary will handle grades 1 through 5, with possible expansion to K-8 in the future. The Clap and Emerson elementary schools are still slated for closure, as is the East Zone Early Learning Center (ECL).

The November 3 School Committee vote approved transformation of the Gavin Middle School into an in-district charter school, UP Academy Charter School of Boston. Also authorized was a similar transformation of an as yet unnamed in-district charter school. Authorization of the in-district charters clears one hurdle in the "Redesign and Reinvest" assault on public education in Boston.

In a series of public hearings since the proposed changes were first announced in October, parents, teachers and students have voiced their overwhelming opposition to the other school closures and reconfigurations. In an effort to defuse this public anger, the School Committee has postponed a final vote on these features of the plan. According to a press release posted on the School Committee web site, the vote on the balance of the proposals has been postponed to "no earlier than Wednesday, December 8."

The November 3 meeting was the latest in a series in which speakers from the audience have made passionate appeals to reason and expressed their anger over a lack of consultation in the process and the failure of Superintendent Carol Johnson to take the feelings of parents, students and staff into consideration. What is lacking thus far, however, is any program or perspective for taking forward a fight to prevent the closures.

The Boston Teachers Union has limited itself to reports of the public protests and formal opposition to the plan, engaging in private discussions with the School Committee while doing nothing to mobilize teachers and other workers against the plan. At a public meeting October 26, BTU President Richard Stutman said that the plan was "ill-conceived" and asked the committee to "start over". "The schools are not underperforming or dysfunctional," Stutman said.

But the BTU is incapable of explaining the source of the school closures, which is bound up with the Obama administration's offensive against public education. This policy is the continuation of a 30-year assault beginning with budget cutting under the Republican Reagan administration in the 1980s, continued by Democrat Bill Clinton with the promotion of charter schools and "school choice" in the 1990s, followed by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 under George W. Bush, which was co-sponsored by former Massachusetts Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy.

This assault on public education has been intensified under the present Democratic administration. The policies of Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, are a repudiation of the basic democratic principle that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic position, have the right to a free, quality education.

The UP Academy in Boston is to be run by a nonprofit

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organization called Unlocking Potential (UP). On its web site, unlocking-potential.org, the organization boasts that a January 2010 "landmark decision" of the Massachusetts state legislature gave school districts new authority to transform these schools.

That legislation was a direct response to Obama's "Race to the Top" program, which gives various bribes to states identifying failing schools. This was followed in March of this year by the release of a list of 35 Massachusetts schools designated as "Level 4" underperforming schools. Each school was given three years to "demonstrate significant academic gains" or face being designated as "Level 5," or underperforming, which means they can then be taken over by the state.

The identified "Level 4" schools were required to develop so-called redesign plans according to one of four options set out by the Obama administration. These are:

• Transformation Model: Replace the principal and improve the school through comprehensive curriculum reform, professional development, extending learning time, and other strategies.

• Turnaround Model: Replace the principal, screen existing school staff, and rehire no more than half the teachers; adopt a new governance structure; and improve the school through curriculum reform, professional development, extending learning time, and other strategies.

• Restart Model: Convert a school or close it and re-open it as a charter school or under an education management organization.

• School Closure: Close the school and send the students to higher-achieving schools in the district.

Teachers at six Boston schools were ordered to reapply for their jobs under the "Turnaround Model".

On its web site, UP states that "To date, school districts have decided to follow the first two, less aggressive models," claiming that "research has shown that these two types of interventions typically yield minimal student achievement improvements."

Under the heading "Unlocking Potential in Massachusetts", the organization boasts:

"The partnership between Boston Public Schools and UP Academy Charter School of Boston represents the first time in state history that the 'restart model' will be pursued to improve an underperforming school. Through this partnership, the Gavin Middle School, an existing 'Level 3' underperforming school, will be closed at the end of the 2010-11 school year, pending state approval, and immediately reopened in fall 2011 as UP Academy Charter School of Boston, managed and operated by Unlocking Potential."

If allowed to go unchallenged, the November 3 vote marks a major step in the drive to privatize public education through the use of such in-district charters in the Boston Public Schools system.

In its program, "The Breakdown of Capitalism & the Fight for Socialism in the United States," the Socialist Equality Party advances the concept that education is a social right, "essential to life in a complex modern society and, therefore, 'inalienable'. Working people must resolve to secure these rights through the mobilization of their strength as a class, independent of and in opposition to the corporate-controlled political parties and the institutions of the capitalist state."

The program warns: "While education in the US has always been plagued by inequality, the expansion of American democracy was accompanied by increasing access to education ... These earlier reforms are now being reversed. It is precisely the egalitarian aspect of public education that makes it the target of the right-wing politicians and the corporate interests they represent."

The defense of education as a social right is bound up with the development of a movement based on a socialist perspective independent of both capitalist parties and their defenders in the trade union bureaucracy.

The offensive against public education must be met with the development of an independent mass movement of working people in Boston and throughout the state to prevent school closures and defend the jobs of teachers and staff. Committees of parents, students, teachers and school staff must be formed to plan the next stage in the struggle against the school closures and the fight to defend public education.

As part of the preparation of such a movement, the Socialist Equality Party is holding a public meeting in Cambridge on November 20 to discuss its program and its significance in the struggles of the working class.

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