Boston superintendent announces more school closures

John Marion
6 December 2010

Boston Public Schools (BPS) Superintendent Carol Johnson announced a new round of school closures to a packed meeting December 2 at Jamaica Plain's English High School. The latest version of Johnson's "Redesign and Reinvest" strategy includes the closure of nine schools, the merger of 10 existing schools into five, and the transformation of three others into charter or "innovation" schools.

Parents, teachers and students filled the auditorium of America's oldest public high school to overflowing, outraged over the escalating attack on public education being mounted by Johnson and the Boston School Committee. About 30 people who were not able to fit into the auditorium were shunted to the school's gym to watch the proceedings on TVs.

As has been the case since the first school closures were announced earlier this year, last Thursday's meeting was a travesty of democracy. In keeping with standard practice, the superintendent waited until the day before the meeting to send parents and teachers a list of the proposed school closings. The closures and mergers were then presented as a fait accompli, with a panel of upper-level school administrators put before the audience to explain technical and financial aspects of the plan.

Attendees were not allowed to ask questions from the floor, but instead were forced to write their questions on "feedback cards" on the way into the meeting; these cards were then pre-screened by a moderator to make sure those selected were not too challenging. Attendees who tried to speak from the floor were told to go out to the lobby to sign up on a list for two minutes of microphone time at the very end of the meeting.

The hurried and confused presentation of Johnson's closure proposals represents a further stifling of democracy. While her fiscal year 2012 budget is not due to the School Committee until the first Wednesday in February, Johnson is calling for the committee to vote to approve her latest plan on December 15.

The schools now threatened with closure are the East Zone Early Learning Center, Fifield Elementary, and the Middle School Academy—all in Dorchester—Emerson Elementary in Roxbury, Farragut Elementary in Mission Hill, Agassiz Elementary in Jamaica Plain, and the Social Justice Academy and The Engineering School in Hyde Park. Five of these schools were not on the chopping block in previous plans. While the Middle School Academy's building would be closed, its students and teachers would supposedly be moved to "excess capacity" space in South Boston's Gavin School, which itself is to be turned into a charter school.

Over the summer and through October, Superintendent Johnson and her staff had proposed the closure of five schools and the transformation of a sixth into a charter school. The changes were presented as part of an "acceleration agenda" that would redesign the schools in the interest of improving graduation rates, scores on standardized testing, and the "success of all children" as they prepare for college.

Now, with Halloween passed, the wolf has taken off its sheep costume as both the School Committee and upper administration acknowledge that the economic crisis and teachers' salaries are the real reasons for their attacks on public education. Johnson's December 1 letter announcing the new closure plan started with the statement that "we are in the worst economic times since the Great Depression."

The switch in rationales was first presented publicly at the November 17 School Committee meeting, when John McDonough, the chief financial officer of the Boston Public Schools, announced a projected deficit of $63 million in the school budget for fiscal year 2012, and of $91 million the following year.

© World Socialist Web Site

McDonough repeated this second figure at the December 2 meeting, but did not offer a single detail or make any effort to explain how he arrived at such a dire number. He attributed the $63 million gap for next year to the loss of funds as the federal stimulus ends and to cuts in local aid from the state because of the ongoing economic crisis, as well as additional costs of teachers' raises and benefits.

The city's fiscal year 2011 budget estimated an increase of $73 million in the property tax levy for fiscal year 2012, which would more than cover the schools' projected deficit of $63 million. The same budget document projected a total shortfall of $69.7 million across all city agencies in 2012. McDonough's projected school deficit accounts for 91 percent of the citywide gap. Given that there has not been a drastic drop in city or state revenues since the city's budget was promulgated in July, McDonough's numbers should be looked at with skepticism.

Even if McDonough's predictions turn out to be true, it is teachers, students and working class families who are being told they must sacrifice under conditions where public education is already woefully underfunded. There are currently about 56,000 students in the Boston Public Schools. Including transportation, heat, electricity, salaries, special education, English language immersion, and meals for low-income children, the yearly operating budget of the BPS is slightly more than $1 billion, or about $18,000 per student per year. In comparison, the federal government estimates the cost per soldier of the war in Afghanistan at $1 million per year.

Approximately $160 million, or 16 percent, of the total BPS budget comes from sources other than the city. While most of these funds come from the state and federal governments, private foundations with an interest in charter schools have also been moving in. In 2005, the Gates Foundation invested $9 million in BPS to "enhance teaching" and improve "district-level policy." In 2008, a $1.5 million Arts Expansion Fund was set up with a company called EdVestors. The company was co-founded by an executive of UBS Financial Services and funded in part by Bank of America and Bain Capital.

At the December 2 meeting, Johnson, McDonough and the School Committee openly laid the blame for the schools' financial problems on teachers' salaries, benefits, and contractual raises. McDonough tried to play teachers off against custodians by complaining that the administration had not been able to reduce custodial salaries and therefore needs cuts from the teachers.

McDonough and Johnson pledged "reforms" to the teachers' contract, including the lengthening of the workday by one hour, and promised to "explore new salary and benefit structures that recognize effective teaching through evaluations." The unions, which were silent at the December 2 meeting, are prohibited from striking by state law.

Johnson herself is above the pain of salary cuts. While she has promised not to take any bonuses or raises until her contract is renewed in 2012, the *Boston Globe* reported shortly after her appointment that Johnson's base salary of $275,000 was not only the highest superintendent salary in the schools' history, but was $70,000 more than that of her predecessor.

Not only teachers' salaries are under attack, but also students' safety and well-being. School Committee member John Barros promised to cut the schools' transportation budget by denying busing to any students whose parents choose to live within one mile of their school. McDonough acknowledged that this year the schools are trying to save $5 million through deferred maintenance of buildings and schools, and that the heat has been lowered in schools throughout the district.

Charter schools were also on the order of the day. Johnson is now proposing to convert the Clap Elementary School—previously slated for closure—into an "innovation" charter school. This change would be in addition to the conversion of two other schools—Odyssey and Gavin—into charters. Under state law, "innovation" schools can override existing union contracts if two-thirds of the teachers agree.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site