

Boston School Committee approves expanded closure plan

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An angry overflow audience of around 700 students, parents, teachers and other school staff witnessed the unanimous vote of the Boston School Committee last Wednesday in favor of an expanded school closure program aimed at offsetting a \$63 million deficit in next year's budget.

The December 15 meeting followed a now well-established pattern. An extended period of so-called "public comment," lasting several hours, was used to allow the audience to let off steam, while having no impact on the committee who had already made their decision long before the meeting was held.

Throughout the summer and fall, Boston Schools Superintendent Carol Johnson claimed to be listening to the concerns of "the communities" while pressing ahead with the initial proposal to close five schools and transform a sixth into a charter school. At a series of public meetings, attempts were made to justify the closure program as "reforms" aimed at improving education throughout the city. The plan was titled "Redesign and Reinvest: Our path to academic success" in an attempt to hide its real aim—a fundamental attack on public education.

At meeting after meeting, angry parents respectfully asked the school committee to take account of the unique qualities of the facilities slated for closure. The response from the overpaid automatons on the platform was to not only proceed with the five school closures, but to almost double the number of schools slated to close. The delayed announcement of the additional schools was a deliberate ploy to divide opponents and prevent a city-wide mobilization against the closures. The expanded list was revealed just two weeks prior to the scheduled vote.

With the announcement of the expanded closure list, the real reason for the closures was made known. As

the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported previously, the economic crisis and teachers' pay and conditions are the real reasons for the attack on public education. On the day before the school committee meeting, Mayor Thomas Menino said of the vote to close schools at a gathering of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, "This is the right thing to do at the right time." He urged the assembled big-business crowd, "Let's not wait to get the reforms we need now. If we miss this opportunity, we have to wait three or four more years."

Menino made clear that the "opportunity" he was talking about went beyond the current list of closures. According to a boston.com report, the mayor did "more than back his superintendent, Menino publicly injected himself into the ongoing negotiations for a new teachers' contract, ticking off four tangible but difficult changes. He called for increased flexibility for principals and headmasters; demanded that teachers' pay be linked to student performance; advocated for a longer school day; and pushed to revamp the system used to evaluate teachers."

According to the report, the 6,500-member Boston Teachers Union has been in discussions on the contract specifics.

As with the school closures and mergers, however, opposition to this latest witch-hunt against teachers cannot be left in the hands of the teachers union, which has limited its response to verbal criticism, making no attempt to mobilize teachers and other school and city workers in defense of public education.

Alongside the school closures and attacks on teachers is a push for more charter schools that function independently of the local school systems and teachers' union contracts. An essential aspect of Superintendent Johnson's original plan was the transformation of

Gavin Middle School into an in-district charter school, UP Academy Charter School of Boston. The school committee voted to approve that transformation on November 3.

It is clear that the attack on public education must be met with an offensive of the entire working class in defense of education as a social right. There are, however, forces seeking to turn this opposition into a race-based, rather than class-based struggle. A coalition of various unidentified middle-class radical and liberal tendencies functioning under the name Coalition for Equal Quality Education has appeared at the school committee meetings with leaflets and placards demanding “Stop the resegregation of Boston Schools.”

Attempts at the December 15 meeting to divert opposition along racial lines, with chants of “Education is a right, not for the rich and white,” were not taken up by the audience. But if left unchallenged, such positions will serve only to divide working people along racial lines and prevent the necessary class offensive against the cuts.

While it is true that the school closures will disproportionately impact black, Hispanic and Cape Verdean families, this is only an indication of the change in the composition of the working class this has taken place in cities such as Boston. The decision to close schools is motivated not by racial, but class considerations. The closures in Boston are part of a national offensive against the public schools that has been intensified since the election of Democratic President Obama. 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.

For their part, the school committee members—the majority of whom are either black or Hispanic—are equally happy to see the opposition diverted along racial, rather than class lines. A filthy comment in the *Boston Globe*, headlined “A courageous vote,” by one Lawrence Harmon stated:

“The constant verbal abuse from the audience would get the better of school board member Claudio Martinez. His eyes narrowing like a fighter’s, Martinez turned on one especially obnoxious protester who had been howling like a banshee and bouncing around the

English High School auditorium like a billiard ball. ‘When I need a comment from a white, privileged kid like you. I’ll let you know,’ said Martinez.”

The author conveniently fails to report the protester’s response that he was in fact unemployed.



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