

New York mayor moves to shut public schools while promoting charters

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Billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg has escalated an assault on public education in New York City by proceeding with plans to close at least 26 public schools this year while adding more than 100 private charter schools. The Department of Education (DOE) has hastened the co-location—in the same buildings as larger schools—of selective, smaller public schools and charter schools that starve traditional schools of space and resources.

Last year, the DOE targeted 19 schools for closure. In a suit brought by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), courts temporarily blocked the closings, based on the DOE's violation of procedures for community and school involvement in the decision. The DOE is moving ahead with plans to close most of these 19 schools as well as others.

Former schools chancellor Joel Klein, now an executive in Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, closed over 90 city schools based on test scores and graduation rates. It is widely believed that Klein resigned his post last year because researchers had exposed a systematic and deliberate dumbing-down of tests in order to produce an appearance of success for Bloomberg's educational policies.

The 26 schools slated for closure serve the poorest sections of the population, with the lowest rates of four-year graduation and low scores on standardized tests. The closings will now go forward under the tenure of Cathleen Black, the new schools chancellor. Black, a wealthy former publishing executive with no experience in education, was appointed by Bloomberg over the outcry of many teachers, parents, and educational specialists.

Black has done little to dispel the fears of parents and teachers that she will worsen conditions in New York City public schools. At a recent appearance in front of parents and teachers, she responded to a parent's remarks about an overcrowding crisis in the public schools by asking, "Could we just have some birth control? It would really help us all out." Shortly after this, she referred to the problems of schools citywide as "many Sophie's choices," using the popular phrase from the plot of the William Styron novel, "Sophie's Choice," which recounts the story of a Nazi concentration camp survivor who had been forced to choose which of her two children to save from the gas chamber.

Both of these quips exhibit the casual arrogance and brutality with which Black will confront the problems of public education in the city—a talent for which she was undoubtedly chosen. She is pursuing a political program of open assault on public education which takes for granted that there is no alternative for

overcrowding in the classrooms, except though a reduction in the number of children, and she will make choices that will result in the survival of education for some, and its destruction for others.

Not only are Black and the DOE closing schools down throughout the city, but in many cases they are giving privately run charter schools, which are subsidized by money from public taxes, preference for placement in public facilities. Despite increased student enrollment in New York City and the aging of buildings, the 2010-2014 capital plan for school construction is \$2 billion less than the previous five-year plan. Yet \$210 million (about 10 percent) of these funds have been assigned for facilities for new charter schools.

The recent history of Louis D. Brandeis High School in Manhattan and John Jay Campus schools in Brooklyn illustrates the method by which DOE undermines schools. Originally established as large, comprehensive schools, Brandeis and John Jay had successful programs, although, like many New York schools, students were coming into high school with low skills, or were immigrant English-language learners or special education students with high needs.

During the economic boom of the 1990s, the communities surrounding these schools, respectively the Upper West Side of Manhattan and Park Slope in Brooklyn, became "gentrified" as rent and housing prices rose. The neighborhoods became increasingly middle class and white.

New, smaller schools were established in the Brandeis and John Jay buildings that continued to draw in students from a wider area of the city, predominantly lower-income, black and Latino working-class.

As Bloomberg and Klein began shutting down schools to make space for their smaller schools with smaller class sizes, the excess student populations were dumped into other schools, including John Jay and Brandeis, with mostly special needs students, English language learners and lower-performing students with more complex educational needs.

The DOE did not give Brandeis and the John Jay Campus schools additional funds to cope with their greatly increased need. The DOE used lower test scores and rates of graduation as an excuse to label the schools as "failing" and to close them.

By 2008, DOE responded to demands of more affluent parents, who were feeling the pressure of the economic downturn and the costs of private schools, for new "elite" schools for their children. In the case of the John Jay campus, this resulted in three

Secondary Schools for Law, Journalism and Research being ordered to share space with a new branch of the Millennium school, a part of the New Vision for Public Schools program funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Similarly, as Brandeis High School was being phased out, three other schools were established in the facility. This fall, another school, the Frank McCourt High School of Writing, Journalism and Literature, with selective admissions procedures guaranteed to favor more children from the gentrified Upper West Side, was opened with the strong backing of local Democratic politicians.

Now the DOE is imposing yet another co-location at Brandeis, this time by a charter school, the Upper West Success. Parents and teachers at two other West Side elementary schools had fought off proposed Upper West Success co-locations, primarily over the issue of overcrowding.

Most of the trustees listed on the Success Charter Network web site are financiers from investment firms, or their spouses, including Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley.

The Success chain is the creation of former city council member Eva Moskowitz, who has leveraged her influence as former chair of the City Council's Education Committee to cast herself as seller of educational services. Her most attractive feature to wealthy investors is that, as chair of the committee, she bitterly attacked contract protections for teachers. Today, while teachers face layoffs, her salary as the CEO of Success has risen to \$450,000 annually.

In the case of both campuses, the DOE has sought to impose a tiered system of public education, with some smaller schools receiving funding from outside institutions, such as the Gates Foundation with smaller class sizes and better resources, and other schools—usually those with the poorest and educationally neediest students—condemned to crowded and minimum security prison-like conditions.

A more direct transformation of education into a mere extension of the corporate world has been reported in the *New York Times* for Paul Robeson High School in Brooklyn. The DOE is planning to “partner” the school with IBM. The high school will include grades 9 to 14, and grant an associate degree that may earn students a job at IBM. As art, music, and social studies have been sacrificed to budget cuts and a test-driven curriculum, public schools could now become little more than feeders with corporate logos emblazoned on their entrances.

From the point of view of New York City's stratum of billionaires and multimillionaires, who send their children to elite and costly private schools, an important byproduct of this two-tier, unequal public education is the manner in which it attempts to pit different sections of the working population against each other for dwindling educational resources.

This model itself is only a way station in the full privatization of education and all other so-called initial programs, such as Social Security, that the ruling elite is seeking to subordinate to profit.

Scattered protests of parents, students and teachers have taken place throughout the city in the past several weeks, including those at Beach Channel High School in Queens, Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx, John Jay in Brooklyn and Jamaica High in Queens. Protests have also been held at several elementary and

middle schools, and the city-wide meetings of the DOE's Panel for Educational Policy, most of whose members are appointed by the mayor. At Jamaica High School, a student play protesting its closing gained national attention.

However, nothing can be done to halt to the process under the prevailing leadership of the teachers' union and various local Democratic Party politicians.

The UFT and other trade unions, in spite of protests against overcrowding, schools closures, teacher layoffs, and assessment by testing, do not fight, but instead facilitate budget cuts and school closing through their alliance with the Democratic Party, the party of Race to the Top. The UFT itself is the sponsor of a charter school in the city.

Parents' and teachers' opposition is channeled into little more than defending their own “turf,” and they are left with the empty divide-and-rule argument that their school is worthy of being exempted from the attacks.

The defense of quality public education for everyone can go forward only on an anti-capitalist and international basis. A broadly conceived social program is necessary to defend public education. It would require the elimination of poverty through jobs, livable wages, low-cost health care and housing made possible through the recovery of the massive amounts of social wealth now stolen by the super-rich.

A complete break with the Democratic Party and all other political organizations of the elite is the first condition for developing such a program among the millions of New York City working people crushed by the economic crisis.

Action committees of parents, teachers, and students—independent of the unions—must begin to fight for these polices. They must organize strikes, mass demonstrations, and occupations. Above all, a struggle to defend public education and all other democratic rights of the working class requires a party based on a socialist program. This is the goal of the International Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party.



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