

New York City teachers and students voice opposition to school closings

A WSWS reporting team
11 February 2011

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers and students who came to protest the closing of 22 schools at the February 3 public hearing and rigged vote held by the city Department of Education's Panel for Educational Policy.

Khaliyl is a 9th grader from the Urban Assembly Academy of History for Young Men, a small school that had been set up under the Bloomberg administration and is now being closed. He said, "We love our school and want to support it. They are voting on our school. The school is said to be failing but we have extracurricular activities after school for math and English. They help us prepare for the Regents exams,

"The DOE should have come to us earlier. We had a B rating, but when they saw a change by which we were labeled failing, they should have stepped in to help. We are not selective like charters. We accept any student. When students get an F, teachers don't kick them out but help the students. Why doesn't the DOE help schools? If there were more charters, what would happen to the kids who don't do so well?"

Craig Johnson, a public school teacher, told the WSWS, "If Bloomberg put as much money into schools that are closing down as he does into Brooklyn Tech, Stuyvesant or Bronx Science High Schools, they wouldn't be closing down. If the Department of Education felt these schools are not where they should be, why is something not done to improve them? It seems instead of correcting the supposed downward course of the school, they put in a charter school.

"Even if the charter schools have to take the same tests, they have better finances from the public to educate students. Why aren't the amounts equal? Education is something you have to invest in to have

results down the road. By putting money into charter schools, the investor gets an immediate profit or payoff. The second thing that happens when public money is put into charter schools is that they start getting rid of public school teachers. The charter schools cut the wages, benefits and seniority of teachers.

"What I think about charters for the students who enroll in them, is that it is like putting a square peg in a round hole. This is what it is like if you enroll your children in a charter school. I compare them to little military academies where they tell you to do this and to do that."

Martin Freeman, a teacher at Health Professions High School, said, "Where should I start with the problems facing public education? I'm worried about our situation. I'm worried that Health Professions HS may be shut down even though it is not being closed right now. I think all of the public schools are worried now because they might be closed next.

"Teachers are demoralized. They are worried about their careers, their wages, their benefits and their seniority. I think the charter schools are salivating on the sidelines. They want to come in and take over. The city wants to take teachers off their payroll and subcontract the whole business out. This is very obvious. Bloomberg is a businessman. Cathleen Black was not hired to run an education system. This is the death knell of public education.

"We don't know how it will come out. It depends on what the politicians can get away with. The Republicans are pushing for privatizing public education with charter schools. New York Governor Cuomo seems like he is for it. I was disappointed in

Obama when the school fired all the teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Island. Obama said, ‘Good. They should fire them.’

“There are bad educators like there are bad doctors, lawyers and bad practitioners in every profession. They point to the most egregious situations, but most educators are good. How could Obama say that they were all bad or that any of them were bad? The whole thing has to do with money. It is budget-driven. The real agenda is making money, and the politicians want to get the cost of education off their books. Let the parents go to the private charter schools and complain to them.

“The rich are more protected by the politicians than everyone else. Look at Obama’s tax cut for the rich. Look at Cuomo’s cuts to Medicaid. What kind of health care will poor people have? The fact is the politicians won’t put money into the social programs like public education.”

John Cunningham, who teaches at Brooklyn Tech, told us, “I feel the big picture of this situation is gentrification. There won’t be any more places for poor people to go to school. This reminds me of the history of the 1920s and ’30s, and it won’t stop until people start jumping up and down about it.”

Nigel Hill is a senior at Robeson HS, which PEP voted to phase out at the meeting two days prior. At that meeting, he spoke against closing Robeson and bringing in Bloomberg’s signature school, a company school where the city will partner with IBM and change the high school curriculum into a grade 9 to grade 14 program where graduates would be trained to go into the IBM corporation. He spoke to the WSWS at a rally outside Robeson several weeks ago, and had come to the PEP meeting after they had already decided to phase out Robeson.

Nigel said that the struggle was not over, “On Tuesday, February 1, the PEP decided to close down Robeson. I think there will be about 20 or 30 students and teachers coming tonight from Robeson to support the other schools’ fight against closures. I spoke at the teachers’ union rally before the meeting this afternoon. I said to the teachers that we went through the same experience of almost being phased out a year ago. Students were demoralized, and some students may have thought they were failing students because the DOE called Robeson a failing school.

“Last year I just participated in rallies. This year I am president of the student government. Last year I didn’t know that much about it, and I thought maybe the school was failing because the DOE said so. I wrote an op-ed article against the closure that I sent to many outlets. It was published in the *Amsterdam News* and a number of other publications.

“I went around recruiting for our freshman class this year. Last year we only had 26 incoming freshmen because they were threatening to close down Robeson. Now there are 400 students prepared to enroll as freshmen at Robeson, but this depends on what happens with being phased out again. I spoke to the student body to tell them what is going on. I spoke at half time at basketball games. Some of them felt like there was no hope, but when they were informed, they felt like they could do something about it. The teachers like the support that the students are giving them in this fight.

“I thought the decision of the PEP two nights ago was ridiculous. It was ridiculous because I thought that they should really want to hear from the students the most. But if they don’t it is their loss. They cut me off at the microphone before I was finished and were rude about it when I was the first student who spoke. I thought the charter school students and parents are fighting for the same things. Why should they be made to bump heads?

“I don’t think the education budget should be cut. I thought the decision to close down Robeson was ludicrous. Today, I am here to support the other schools on the DOE’s list of schools for phase out or closure like Metropolitan, Jamaica and Beach high schools. I know some of the students at those schools. We have to keep going on even after they close them down.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact