

Detroit students speak out against closure of Catherine Ferguson Academy

A WSWS reporting team
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Catherine Ferguson Academy (CFA) in Detroit is scheduled to be permanently closed this Thursday on the last day of the school year. Emergency Financial Manager (EFM) Roy Roberts, a former General Motors executive, ordered the closure of the school as part of a plan to close or sell off dozens of schools to charter interests.

The all-female academy is nationally and internationally renowned for its program, which allows pregnant teens and parenting students to continue school in an environment that provides childcare, medical assistance and parenting classes.

Young women who ordinarily would not have the resources and time to receive a high school diploma have been given that opportunity since the opening of CFA nearly 30 years ago.

CFA has an exceptionally high graduation rate and daily attendance is almost perfect. The school even has a large adjacent lot with a farm and animals, where students and their children can tend gardens and learn many things that can't be experienced within the classroom. There is broad support for the school to stay open from students, teachers and throughout the surrounding community.

Monday afternoon, WSWS reporters went to the CFA as students were finishing up finals. Students talked of their experience at the school and about its proposed closing.

Esha, age 19, went to CFA prior to becoming a mother and was coming in with her son to apply for this fall. For her, the convenience and services offered made the school second to none.

"I can walk here from my house, but many people will come from a long way for this school. There are nurses here, childcare with only seven kids per room, they have Friday makeup days if you miss a day—there

is so much more than just a school."

Esha was frustrated with those who were in charge of closing the school and didn't accept the argument that there was no money for schools. "The ones responsible for the closure of the school want to invest more in the things that put us in debt to begin with. The people closing this school shouldn't have any authority at all. Because of CFA, girls can go to school with their kids. If the school closes, they will have to find day care for their kids and try to find two jobs to pay the bills."

Jamar and Brandon were there with Esha and her boy, and they too were angry about the academy closing. Brandon said, "It doesn't make any sense. The school board already closed 6-7 elementary schools in this area. I think the closing of this school is one of the worst things they could do.

"Young women and their children are not going to get the chance to make it that they received at this school. It's like they don't care. They are saying it doesn't matter what happens to them."

Teresa Griffin was picking up her daughter Searre Jefferson who goes to CFA with her twins. She said, "This is the only school for teen mothers where they can bring their babies and attend classes. It brought her a long way forward. If they close this school they are going to throw all of these kids back in their development. It's not fair.

"At CFA they help students become responsible by teaching them parenting skills. When they arrive in the morning, they know they have to get things together within a time frame. They have to feed the babies, change their diapers and then get to their classes.

"This was especially important for my daughter's children because they have asthma. There are times they have to administer treatments for the asthma. Because the kids are at the school they can do this

(without worrying).”

Raesha Miese, age 14, started school at Ferguson in January and would like to go into Mortuary Science. “You can graduate faster here because there are smaller classes and the teachers give you more attention. Its nice, at lunchtime moms can bring their babies and eat together. If they close the school I will have to find somewhere else to go. And to whoever is closing this school, *they* should come here and see how great it is.”

Tamya, a 17-year-old mother with her four-month-old son, also spoke along with Sade Coppins, 16. Tamya said, “I feel bad about them closing this school, it’s the only one of its kind. Girls here are getting their life together, what are they supposed to do now? Closing will just lead to dropouts.”

Sade noted, “What is great about the school is the atmosphere inside. The principal helps us out a lot. She tries to get a connection with everybody. People who came for the past couple of years are very sad—in fact everybody is down because of what is happening. This place helps so much with nutritional assistance, of course the day care, things like that. They give you a lot of social support.”

Loreen Rawls, a school services assistant, said, “It’s not fair; they are doing this last minute and messing up everyone’s life. I have been here for five years but will only get two more paychecks. I won’t be able to apply for unemployment until July 29.

“We had already signed up in April to work during summer school and now that won’t happen. I hope they hire me back somewhere and I get to keep a job, but what about the girls and their babies, what will they do?”

Jasmine Myles, another CFA student, was adamantly opposed to the closing. “You always hear complaints about the low graduation rate in Detroit, but here is a school where the rate is very high, yet they plan to close it. It doesn’t make sense.

“There was another school for pregnant teens, but they closed that one in 2010. This is the only school left.

“There is a great pre-school program for the children here. They learn so much. They even have hayrides and yet they are in school. It is fun for the kids, and they love to go to school.

“The other problem we face is you can’t take your kids to a regular school. In a regular school having a

child around is disruptive. Then other people can’t learn. It just doesn’t work.”



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