

New York City teachers, students and parents oppose school “overhauls” and closures

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New York City's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg will “overhaul” 33 schools and phase out another 18. The mayor controls the city's public schools, the largest district in the United States, with over 1 million students.

Most of the schools are in Brooklyn, and their students are drawn overwhelmingly from working-class neighborhoods. The 18 schools to be phased out will not accept incoming first-year classes after this year.

The schools slated for overhaul have been designated under President Obama's Race to the Top Program as “persistently low-achieving”. These will face a “turn-around” by having their principals and half their teachers fired. While new teachers will be hired, most observers believe that these will be younger, lower-paid teachers with less experience than most of those losing their positions.

Since he took office in 2002, New York's billionaire-in-chief has closed 117 public schools.

In addition, some larger public schools will be forced to share space and resources with smaller schools inserted by the city, including privately-run, publicly financed charter schools.

In cases like these, tensions regularly develop between the students at the larger school (often slated to be closed) and the new school co-located into the building. The administrators of the schools compete for space and often cannot agree to share budgets to fund librarians or music teachers for orchestras. These problems are exacerbated by the budget cuts citywide.

On the evening of January 31, about 250 parents, teachers, students and alumni and supporters from other schools protested the planned closing of Washington Irving High School in lower Manhattan during a public Department of Education (DOE) hearing.

Angry parents yelled “two minutes” at Deputy Chancellor Shael Palakow-Suransky for speaking beyond the allocated time limit to justify the closing. The DOE hearings are highly undemocratic forums held only to give the

appearance that the opinions of the public will be considered.

A routine part of this charade are the local Democrat politicians who express their indignation and promise to fight to the bitter end against the corporate interests to which they are in fact tied. Bloomberg has closed every school that he has targeted since 2002.

Parents at the meeting suggested that a “turnaround” of replacing half the faculty of a school was little more than a setup to prepare the way for charter schools.

One teacher said, “I expect Eva Moskowitz to walk into the auditorium at any moment, tape measure in hand.”

Eva Moskowitz is former City Council member who now runs the Success Academy chain of charter schools. It is widely believed that Moskowitz hopes to expand her business from low-income areas—her initial wedge into the educational marketplace—into potentially more lucrative middle-class neighborhoods.

Carlos Ruiz, a co-president of the Manhattan High School Presidents Council and Parent Association President at the High School for Law, Advocacy and Community Justice, spoke to a WSWs reporter.

“It is all about politics and money. Bloomberg shuts down a lot of schools to bring in charters that bring in a lot of money but they do not provide the services needed or accept all special education students. Where are these kids going to go? They are out in the streets or in jail and we as parents are not going to take this anymore.”

Two Washington Irving students, Kelly Romero and Gustavo Vasquez also spoke to the WSWs.

Kelly said, “It looks like they really don't care about how students and parents feel about it. They mostly just want the money and don't care about education.”

Gustavo explained, “I don't want students to have to transfer just because of money issues. I also had been at

Legacy High School and it is closing. They are cutting teachers and more students are in each class than before. These are teachers who educate us and now students have to go to a different school.”

On February 1, over 200 students and parents rallied in Union Square in lower Manhattan to protest the closing of the nearby Legacy School for Integrated Studies. The students had walked out of the school, and assembled in the park chanting, “Education is a right!” They displayed a large banner that listed the schools that Bloomberg wanted to close this year. Many parents and young people spoke angrily about the mayor.

Jonathan, a junior, said, “We are protesting against the phase-out. We should have another chance. Our new principal made a whole bunch of improvements. We’ve been taking this seriously, all of us. We feel that the mayor set us up. He doesn’t give us enough resources. We have a low budget. About 25 percent of our school is special ed. We need more support. Why run away from the problem?”

Carolyn, a parent, said, “It’s happening at Legacy because no one seems to care. Many of these students are special education children and they’re just being pushed to the back. That’s not right. Where are all these children going to go? The schools are overcrowded as it is. Are they all going to end up in [prison at] Riker’s Island? I don’t think that is fair. I think all the children should have a right to have an education. This school is small, there’s no fighting, there’s no guns. We don’t have anyone searching the children here. These children deserve the same care as any other child in this city.”

She continued, “There is nothing for these kids. Where are these going to go if they can’t get an education? We’re teaching these kids that they have to fight for anything they want in life. No one else is going to stand up for them if they don’t stand up for themselves.”

“Do you see any of the politicians here? No. Do you see [City Council speaker] Ms. Quinn here? No. When we start to vote, instead of voting for a Democrat or a Republican, why not vote for what we really want? There are many more of us poor ones. We need to get together and fight for what we want.”

“I’m a former health and hospital worker and I worked a lot of overtime hours to put my older kids through school. I have a daughter who is in law school because she wants to fight for equality for the youth.”

Other protests have occurred recently. At Herbert Lehman High School in the Bronx on January 27, 200 opponents of that school’s closing packed the auditorium. School officials

are reported to have banned the media from the meeting.

Bloggers reported students from Lehman High, angry at the 30-second limit they were allowed for speaking at the public meeting, joined in protests on January 31 at a meeting at Evander Childs High School campus for schools from across the Bronx facing phase-out.

As has happened at several DOE meetings, students adopted the Occupy Wall Street movement technique called “mic check” to prevent themselves being cut off by DOE representatives. Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott then ended the meeting and walked out.

The ability of the Bloomberg administration to close schools and degrade public education, one of the most fundamental democratic rights, has gone forward because the political establishment is entirely dominated by the super-rich and their quislings in the unions.

Public school closures, overcrowding, competition for decreasing funds and facilities, and especially the privatization of education, continue on relentlessly in New York City.

For the last few years, parents, students, and teachers have protested this assault at city-sponsored meetings, where they are effectively prevented from voicing their views. Less often, they protest in front of schools or in public areas.

Local Democratic Party officials and their allies in the United Federation of Teachers as well as myriad educational and social advocacy groups toss out words of opposition, but allow the closures to go forward. They have made the conditions for public education in the city intolerable.

An independent and socialist mobilization of millions and millions of the city’s working people is becoming an urgent necessity to defend public education in New York City.



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