

New York City high school students speak on school closings

Isaac Finn
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Twenty-four middle and high schools in New York City will be closed down by the city's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, and reopened under new names after firing half the teaching staff. This decision is widely unpopular among teachers, parents, and students and leading to many student protests.

This form of restructuring, known as the turnaround model, is implemented in order to have the schools qualify for funds provided by President Obama's Race to the Top (RTTT) program. Along with removing half the teachers, the overhaul of these schools labeled as "failing" also includes changes in curriculum largely by eliminating classes.

In labeling these schools as "failing," the educational system has intentionally ignored the central factor of poverty that confronts the students outside and inside the classroom. According to an analysis by the Center for Economic Opportunity released in April, more than a quarter of children under the age of 18 in New York City were living in poverty in 2010; 23 percent of families with children were also living in poverty.

Over 70 percent of the students qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch at 12 of the turnaround schools, according to statistics gathered by the Inside Schools web site for the 2010-11 school year. These students come from families that qualify for public assistance benefits or meet the Federal Income Guidelines for poverty.

Students' low test scores have been used as a battering ram against public education and teachers. The Obama administration has sought to blame older teachers who are, it claims, "burnouts" and only remain in schools because of their seniority rights.

In response to the turnarounds, students at various high schools have engaged in protests to demand that their school does not suffer from half its staff being

forced to leave. In February this included a walkout at Herbert Lehman High School, as well as other schools not undergoing turnarounds, to join a protest against school closures in Union Square.

John Dewey High School students in Brooklyn walked out of classes in March, to show their opposition to the turnaround. This was the second walkout in three years, as students staged a similar walk out in 2010 when the city first raised the prospect of phasing out the school.

Students at Legacy High School for Integrated Studies in Manhattan organized numerous protests demanding the opportunity to speak with Mayor Michael Bloomberg and about the closing of their school, including a protest outside of the mayor's residence in the wealthy Upper East Side.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers and students from turnaround schools about their views on the closings.

At Lehman High School, Shamar Colon, a senior, said about the closures, "They are not considering and do not care about the students and the teachers. All they care about is money. In order for them to open a new school, they want us to fail. They want to prove that they are right. They have all their cards and the game is being played against us.

"Lehman is ethnically mixed with a lot of blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Asians. I don't think that this is racially motivated. Lehman is a good school. The students who joined in the protests are brave because they are willing to fight back.

"I think that they are trying to criminalize the teachers as failing. It is not fair. A great deal of blame is the social environment that we are in. I blame the government for the lack of faith that they have in us."

When asked if he felt represented by current political

system, Shamar replied, “A lot of the Democrats and Republicans do not represent our interests. The true criminals in our society are the ones that are supposed to be protecting us. The government and the banks are taking our money and making us poorer. The police are harassing us, killing us like Sean Bell and also what happened to Trayvon Martin.

“The closing of our and many other schools is an attack on education. They want only the rich to succeed.

“I have been accepted to college next year. I hate to take out loans, but my parents cannot afford to spend a lot of money. We are middle class, and we don’t have tens of thousands of dollars to pay for college.”

Robert Sougrain, a junior at Lehman, said, “I think the turnaround is completely ridiculous because the DOE [Department of Education] is blaming the teachers for the students’ performance levels. They say because you have a student in your class and the student fails, it is the teacher’s fault. It is not their fault. If a student fails it is because the student doesn’t do schoolwork or doesn’t listen to the teacher’s guidance. My classes aren’t that big. They have from 25 to 35 students in them. Are they supposed to be smaller? I don’t know. This is what I have experienced.

“If they remove half of the teachers, the students will feel like they can mold the new ones into what they like. They are not solving the problem by taking away the teachers. Things will just get worse in the school. It is the conditions at home students have that make the problems. There are many parents who are working two jobs. The problem is the conditions that young people are growing up in.”

Wayne Washington, an English teacher at Lehman with 11 years experience, said, “What the mayor is doing is unconscionable. They started 11 years ago to break the public school system up into ‘small schools.’ I’ve been in the small schools, and all they are doing is creating turf wars. You walk around the corner of the hall, and there are turf wars over any kind of space, the floor area and whole floors of the building. With the ‘turnaround’ they will have three schools, and they will rename Lehman ‘Throgs Neck’ for reasons that make no sense. In a few years there will be six schools here.”

At John Dewey High School, slated for closure, freshman Katie Young explained, “I think the

turnaround is unnecessary. I have just started at Dewey, and I don’t think politicians should get involved with this because they don’t know anything about it.

“In politics, it is Bloomberg who is involved. I heard a while ago that Bloomberg was going to give us another chance if we increased our graduation rate and grades. There has been an increase in the graduation rate to 74 percent, and I’ve heard grades have improved also.

“I think the teachers’ union should do more to protect the teachers. They should protect their jobs. There were petitions from students and teachers here to stop the ‘turnaround.’ There were demonstrations also.”

George Ayad, a junior at Dewey, spoke to the WSWs about the turnaround model: “I think it is unfair for freshmen because they will have to find a new school. It will also get rid of all the extracurricular activities at the school.

“The turnaround is also unfair for the staff. Some teachers have worked here for 15 years and they are losing their jobs.”

Referring to political system, George said, “I think this is a fraud. The politicians are taking all of this into their own hands. People need to do something about it.”



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