

Washington, DC chancellor announces closures of dozens of public schools

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Last Tuesday, District of Columbia Public School chancellor Kaya Henderson announced that the DC Public School System (DCPS) would be enacting a round of closings for 20 schools in the US capital. Citing reasons such as under-enrollment and poor performance for the closures, the decision would mark the largest attack on public education in the District since former chancellor of education Michelle Rhee's closure of 23 public schools in 2007-2008.

The planned closures, consisting of mostly elementary and middle schools in wards 5-8, would largely fall on communities located in the impoverished southeast section of the city.

Population counts have shown that as of 2000, the DCPS has seen a decline in student enrollment. The decision to close schools and "consolidate" the system is touted as a way to compensate for this occurrence. DCPS currently counts its average number of students per school at fewer than 400. In contrast, nearby Fairfax County lists an average of more than 900 students per facility.

Likewise, when the population of students entering grade school is scheduled to see an increase in 2015, the DCPS has stated it will then be in the market for more classroom space. This, of course, does not account for the types of schools that would then be introduced.

Currently, in the DCPS system, charter schools have first go at any newly opened public spaces awaiting construction. This would lead to a furthering of the preponderance of privatized or otherwise unaccountable institutions being given public funds, as well as a "consolidation" of the remaining students into already overcrowded public school facilities.

A 2007 study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) produced findings stating that certain

forms of charter schools in the region lacked "an accountability infrastructure that could assure Congress...and the public that its funds were used effectively and in compliance with laws and regulations" (see "White House strikes deal to expand school vouchers in nation's capital").

Currently, Washington, DC, is the second most charter-heavy school district in the US, second only to New Orleans, which has seen a massive shift to for-profit education since Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In 2008, then-chancellor Michelle Rhee made a name for herself by shuttering more than 23 "underperforming" schools in the District. Rhee has since gone on to publicly champion the cause of private charter schools replacing public education in a number of venues. According to a recent report by the city's auditor, the 2008 closings were found responsible for declines in property values and clean-up costs exceeding the costs that it would have taken to re-invest in the schools.

The decision to close schools was based partially on the results of a report released earlier this year by Chicago-area consulting firm IFF (formerly Illinois Faculty Fund). IFF cited instances of under-enrollment as well as poor grade performances as reasons for "revamping." The report had offered unspecific recommendations for "improvement" of the selected schools, as well as employing evaluation methods seen as "overly simplified" in order to label schools and teachers as failures.

IFF is also known for its personal dealings with charter schools, making nearly \$57 million in profits from loans given to Chicago-based charters. The report itself was partly funded by the arch-conservative Walton family, multibillionaire owners of Wal-Mart.

Earlier this year, Henderson announced plans to

temporarily lay off as many as 333 teachers from the public school system, due to regularly scheduled department closures. Though promising that the majority of teachers would be immediately hired back in some form, the measure leaves principals the option to eliminate those teachers deemed “poorly performing.”

Feigning concern for the results this decision would have on low-income families’ access to education in the District, Henderson has embarked on numerous public meetings, centered in the areas that will be most affected by the cuts, mostly occurring at the end of this month.

DC public school advocates have long complained that the shutting of schools threatens to leave many youth without the means to an education. According to a recent study taken by *Measure of America*, it was found that in the more impoverished areas of Washington, DC, nearly one in three youth are neither in school nor working. The new policies enacted by Kaya Henderson would only go towards increasing such instances.

The District is also witness to some of the highest levels of inequality in the country, with a recent report released by the DC Fiscal Policy Institute showing that one in three children in DC were living in poverty.

The Obama administration has shown no mercy toward the concept of a “free public education” during his first term in office. Disguising its policies under the innocuous term “education reform,” the Obama White House seeks to force “underperforming” schools in impoverished areas to compete for funds from the federal government. If certain test scores and graduation rates are not achieved, schools are then shut down and teaching staff are laid off, to be replaced by private charters.

Earlier this fall, tens of thousands of teachers struck against such policies in Chicago, whose mayor, Rahm Emmanuel, is the president’s own former White House chief of staff. This strike was opposed by both big business parties, and was quickly shut down by the Chicago Teachers Union because it cut across the union’s ties to the Democratic Party establishment in the city. Emmanuel swiftly moved ahead in the aftermath of the strike, announcing plans to close more than 100 public schools.

The author also recommends:

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[15 May 2012]



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