

Philadelphia to shut one out of every six public schools

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The Philadelphia School District has recently announced plans to shutter 37 public schools by the end of June. The district operates roughly 225 schools overall, meaning that the closure plan will effectively eliminate one out of every six schools in the city, with certain zip codes being effectively removed from the school system. The magnitude and character of this plan is without precedent in the history of the city.

Announcing the plan during a news conference, District Superintendent William R. Hite, Jr. said the city faced a “historic moment” that would be accompanied by “tremendous controversy, angst, and emotions.” In all, the move would impact 17,000 students and 1,100 teachers, primarily within the most impoverished areas of the city.

The city’s Democratic mayor, Michael Nutter, praised Hite for making tough choices that their predecessors avoided. “Their decision was one that says, ‘You cannot kick the can down the road any farther,’” Nutter said, adding that Hite has his “full and unequivocal support.”

Like other cities implementing sweeping school closings—including Chicago and Washington, DC—Philadelphia authorities are pointing to falling enrollment to justify the closures. But declining enrollment is a self-fulfilling prophecy, the result of years of budget cuts, school closings and declining neighborhoods that have literally driven thousands of students from the district.

Of the city’s 195,000 reported available “seats,” roughly 53,000 are empty. Most of these under used facilities are in neighborhoods whose student population has been devastated by budget cuts and lack of services.

The outcome of further eliminating access to public education in this case will not result in a revamping of

the remaining schools, but a massive exodus of students disappearing from the school system altogether. This, in turn, will be utilized to close more schools and turn many of them over to for-profit charter operators.

This is line with the reactionary education “reform” agenda of the Obama administration, which has utilized standardized tests to scapegoat and fire teachers, expand charter schools and tailor the public education system ever more closely to the needs of big business.

Hite cynically claimed some of the estimated \$28 million in savings from closures would be reinvested in the city’s remaining schools. Public education advocacy groups disputed the claim, saying the cost of handling dozens of abandoned school buildings would eat up much of the so-called savings.

Hite said the closures were necessary to stave off far graver financial consequences resulting from the district’s estimated deficit of \$1.1 billion over the next five years. Much of the crisis is due to continual funding reductions by Republican Governor Tom Corbett who oversaw state cuts of nearly \$420 million in the last year alone.

Philadelphia already has a lower rate of per-student education funding than any other major American city. Under these circumstances, the district recently borrowed \$300 million to cover its bills and issue paychecks to employees up until the end of the school year.

With nearly 30 percent of its population living in official poverty, Philadelphia is one of the poorest big cities in the US. In the period between 2010-11, poverty in the city jumped by nearly two percentage points, from 26.7 to 28.4 percent, respectively. The US Census Bureau has released data showing that in 2011 nearly 40 percent of all children in the city lived in poverty.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers has made it clear it intends to do nothing to seriously fight the school closings. Having collaborated for years with the Democratic Party politicians in Philadelphia and the state capital of Harrisburg, the PFT could come up with nothing more than an appeal to state and city officials for a “moratorium on school closings until full community-impact analysis is completed and released to the public.”

This is similar to the proposals of the Chicago Teachers Union, which has argued that city officials could carry out a more orderly shutdown of schools with the collaboration of the unions. The CTU, PFT and their parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, are politically aligned to the Obama administration and its ‘reform’ agenda.

Last summer it was reported that the Philadelphia School Reform Commission (SRC), a body which presides over the education system, decided to expand the presence of charters within the city with a \$139 million grant, giving extended five-year licenses to many that had previously ranked poorly within the district.

Philadelphia is listed among the top ten cities in the country for the expanding charter school market. It ranks fourth in terms of both the raw number of students attending charter schools (behind Los Angeles, New York City, and Detroit) as well as the overall percentage of students attending charters (behind New Orleans at 76 percent, and both Detroit and DC at 41 percent each). The number of students attending Philadelphia charters is expected to rise to about 40 percent by 2017.

One such charter operating within the city, the Knowledge is Power Program (or KIPP), is notorious for its practices in inner city districts. A study released last year by Western Michigan University highlighted some of the behavior of the charter, which recently won a grant from the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program.

Among other things, the study found that 15 percent of all KIPP students simply disappear from grading rolls each year, with over 40 percent of African-American students in grades six-eight simply vanishing. After this “attrition” occurs, students are returned to so-called failing public schools, with KIPP pocketing the remaining per pupil funds given by the

government. This is no doubt a contributing factor of the Philadelphia school district’s current deficit. (See, “Washington, DC charter school wins Race to the Top grant”)

Occurrences of such policies are echoed across the state of Pennsylvania. In Harrisburg, the state capital, the elimination of all kindergarten classes was recently announced, along with all sports and arts programs, in order to deal with the city’s fledgling budget. Similarly, in Pittsburgh, the layoffs of nearly 300 city teachers were announced at the beginning of the school year. The firings were the most widespread in the city’s history.

A fight against the destruction of public education will require the independent mobilization of teachers, students and parents in opposition to the trade unions, the Democratic and Republican parties and the corporate interests they serve.

The authors also recommend:

Officials move to dismantle Philadelphia public school system

[3 May 2012]

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania schools to eliminate kindergarten

[4 June 2012]

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to cut 280 teachers and staff

[9 August 2012]



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