

One in ten Washington, DC public schools to be closed

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On January 17, D.C. education chancellor Kaya Henderson released a finalized list of 15 public school closures slated for this year and next. In all, the plan will eliminate nearly 10 percent of all public schools in the District of Columbia and an estimated 140 teaching positions.

The announcement represents the second in a wave of closures that the city has seen since the previous chancellor Michelle Rhee shut 23 public schools in 2008.

The majority of closures occurred within the impoverished southeast part of the city, with the highest number of closures concentrated in Ward 7. Several closures in Ward 8 were revised when it was discovered it would leave considerable portions of that region without access to a middle school education.

As with districts across the country undertaking major budget cuts, the main issues cited by Henderson were a lack of city funding that would justify keeping schools running and/or an apparent “lack of enrollment.” The D.C. public school system (DCPS) has a student population of fewer than 50,000 individuals, down nearly 100,000 since enrollment highs in the 1960s. The public school system exists parallel to D.C.’s public charter system, which at roughly 40,000 students, manages a near-equivalent number as traditional schools do. Next to New Orleans, Washington, D.C., is the most charter-friendly school district in the United States. “We can’t ignore the fact that we as a city have embraced school choice,” Henderson remarked at the council hearing on Thursday.

The announcement came after the conclusion of several ward-based community hearings, in which DCPS attempted to give a veneer of “participation” from parents and students, many of whom showed

outright hostility to the district’s plans to eliminate more schools. The inclusion of several parent groups’ suggestions aside, the resulting closures of “only” 15 schools show that the parameters for residents’ input were extremely narrow.

Mergers of several public schools with “alternative” models were also announced. Francis Stevens, an elementary school in Ward 2, will be forced to merge with the specialized Schools Without Walls. Malcolm X elementary in Ward 8 will be merged with a charter school. This overcrowding of schools will be used to justify more closures in the future, along with the outright absorption of public schools by their privatized counterparts.

Henderson, a former deputy of Michelle Rhee’s, maintains that the mergers would net the city an additional \$8.5 million in savings. This mirrors the claims of Rhee, who in 2008 announced that closures would result in similar savings for the city. These savings never materialized. In fact, according to a recent audit done by the city, the idling of former elementary schools resulted in losses for the city to the tune of nearly \$40 million.

Similarly, a recent report by the DC Fiscal Policy Institute showed that proclamations of vast city savings due to closures were not credible. In a document entitled “Will School Closings Pay Off? DCPS Closure Plan Unlikely to Produce Significant Savings or Better Resourced Schools,” the think tank stated that estimated savings by the city of roughly \$10.4 million would be almost completely offset by the required closure costs. In addition, the document showed that smaller schools within the District of Columbia operate at a cost roughly equivalent to that of larger schools, with student-to-teacher ratios that are virtually the same.

The announcement of the closures comes alongside a decision by the DC Council to commission a Committee on Education to oversee the city's school system, both charter and traditional. The Council appointed David Catania (Independent-at Large) to oversee the committee.

Catania's role in the doling out of austerity to the D.C. population has been longstanding. He authored the Pension Protection and Sustainability Amendment Act of 2011 to prevent increases in the cost-of-living-adjustment index in the pensions of District teachers, firefighters and police. Catania's dedication to a budget-cutting agenda was outlined in statements given in 2010, saying that "[it's] going to be a heavy focus on evidence and data and accountability," in reference to teachers, while going on to say, "we are in a very, very, very serious point in our journey towards reform." Catania's "independent" status will only serve to mask his agreement with the policies pursued by Henderson and other officials across the country.

A DCPS teacher who wished to remain anonymous spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*, remarking that Catania and Henderson were both interested in siphoning money away from public education. "They both are making money off of this," she said, referring to the six-figure salaries of both. She noted that KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program), a large charter operation in the District, was not the only charter school that benefitted from a selective enrollment, and that the practice of dropping students off the rolls after a facility has received city funds was nearly universal. Referring to the arbitrary nature of the closings, she stated there were numerous schools in wealthier parts of the city that had avoided Henderson's axe.

For his part, Nathan Saunders, president of the Washington Teacher's Union (WTU) embraced the decisions, with the small caveat that qualified teachers be rehired elsewhere in the aftermath of the closures. "We acknowledge DC Public Schools' responsibility to efficiently manage public school facilities and resources," said Saunders upon initially hearing the announcement last year.

The Obama administration, carrying on the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind," has established in the "Race to the Top" program a bipartisan process in which public schools, after years of critical underfunding, have been forced to compete

with charters and other bulwarks of private business, instituting high test recommendations as well as merit pay for teachers. The fundamental results are the closing of schools that fail to meet these requirements and a vast shifting of wealth into private hands.



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