

Sacramento moves to close 11 public elementary schools

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The Sacramento City Unified School District's decision to close 11 elementary schools, primarily in the neighborhoods and suburbs around South Sacramento and in the downtown area, is a direct attack on working people's right to a decent education. In a district with approximately 50 public elementary schools, the closures represent about one fifth of the total. This will force nearly 3,700 students to change schools.

The school board plans to hold a formal vote to confirm the decision on February 21.

The closing of 11 elementary schools in Sacramento is not an isolated occurrence, but is part of broader trend taking place across the US and internationally. Democratic Party lawmakers, primarily California Governor Jerry Brown and US President Barack Obama in the US, have been at the center of driving this forward.

The official reason given for the school closings is their alleged "underutilization," although there are larger budgetary problems at the heart of the decision. Sacramento unified school district has been anticipating a \$10-12 million budget shortfall, although the proponents of the November 2012 California state Proposition 30 claimed that this shortfall would be reduced by the passage of the education tax measure. In fact, the closing of so many schools in the immediate aftermath of the election points to the sham nature of Proposition 30. The measure enacted a regressive sales tax increase that will take money predominantly from working people, ostensibly to fund public education. And yet, in the wake of the election, Brown and company are ramping up the assault on public education. Since coming to office, Brown has cut \$18 billion from K-12 education.

Brown's actions place him at the head of a national

trend. Following in the footsteps George W. Bush, Obama's "Race to the Top" program penalizes schools for failing to achieve benchmarks on standardized tests. The primary beneficiaries of these actions are charter schools, whose numbers have ballooned faster in California than in any other state. The dramatic growth of charter schools has played a role in cherry-picking students away from public schools, thus lowering their test scores.

The 11 schools targeted by the district for closure are utilized, on average, at around 40 percent of their capacity. There is a glaring contradiction between these "underutilized" school campuses and their overfilled classrooms. Sacramento Unified School District expanded the maximum class size in grades K-3 to 32 children per instructor—abandoning the earlier limit of 20 pupils per teacher—on January 20, 2013. From a low of 16 students per teacher in 2000, California's average is now 25-to-1 for K-3 and 31-to-1 for higher grades.

The school district's decision is at its base a statement that these schools are simply not crowded enough. The goal of the Sacramento school closures, as with school closures across the country, is to drive pupils into for-profit charter schools.

Sacramento has been at the forefront of the privatization of education for the past decade.

Sacramento's Democratic mayor Kevin Johnson rose from retired point guard for the Phoenix Suns to political prominence when, in 2003, with funding from the Gates Foundation, he led the drive to convert the historic Sacramento High into a charter school.

He was elected mayor in 2008. In 2009 Johnson delivered a white paper at an Education Summit in Sacramento, which called for "aggressive reforms" to education, specifically the promotion of charter schools. He called for the city to provide charter

schools with “facilities at no cost and access to district resources.” The summit featured speakers from several major charter school corporations, as well as Joel Klein, then chancellor of the New York City Department of Education; Michelle Rhee, then chancellor of the Washington, DC Department of Education; and the Rev. Al Sharpton.

Michelle Rhee is now head of StudentsFirst, the political lobbying organization at the forefront of the drive against public schools, seeking their wholesale disassembly and conversion into for profit charter schools. She is also Mayor Johnson’s wife.

The 11 Sacramento schools scheduled for closure represent important centerpieces in neighborhoods with a combined population well over 100,000. These schools, and the children who attend them, are the victims of poverty and officially sanctioned neglect.

The location of those schools to be closed reveals the class issues underlying the fight for public education.

The downtown area, South Sacramento and the surrounding area has a markedly lower income and a higher population density than the city as a whole. These sections include large Hispanic and minority populations. In Meadowview, 38 percent of the adult population has not completed high school, and educational attainment in these neighborhoods is already well below the average by all measures. These neighborhoods also suffer from poverty rates as high as 30 percent and levels of unemployment above the Sacramento average.

Median household income in the neighborhoods around Washington Elementary is around \$20,000 dollars a year, although the numbers drop to as low as \$12,000 a year in some areas.

Meadowview suffered a school closure last year. Now two more of its seven remaining elementary schools are scheduled to be closed. Since 2000, 11 schools in the Sacramento Unified District have been closed. The currently slated closures will double that number.

The decision to simultaneously close nearly a dozen schools clearly demonstrates that the Sacramento school district has, for the foreseeable future, no intention of continuing to provide the level of education that it did in the past. This decimation of public education is meant to be permanent. According to the school board’s president, “regardless of whether our

fiscal picture get rosier, the lack of capacity in our schools still creates a drag on our district.”

Sacramento’s working class residents are in the crosshairs of the ongoing assault of the ruling on public education. They share a common lot with working class communities across the country whose fundamental social right to education is being stripped from them as public schools are being dismantled to make way for profit-driven private education corporations.

To secure the right to a guaranteed, free, high-quality education for everyone, the working class must break completely from the Democratic Party. The SEP calls on all those who want to take up a fight to defend education and fight school closures—through the formation of independent action committees comprised of parents, students, teachers and area residents—to contact us today. Write to education@socialequality.com or call (313) 409-8083.



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