Philadelphia announces plan to close one in ten public schools

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On Thursday, the Philadelphia School Reform Commission (SRC) voted to close several dozen public schools in the city by the end of June. The final decision, announced late in the evening, will result in the elimination of 26 facilities, representing 10 percent of all public schools in the Philadelphia region.

The decision has provoked widespread anger among students, parents and teachers. A crowd estimated at around 700 gathered outside the SRC meeting Thursday evening to protest the closures. There was a large police presence and Broad Street outside the meeting was closed down. Nineteen of the protesters were arrested as they tried to block entry to the meeting.

Addressing the new proposal, Superintendent William R. Hite told public school employees, "I do believe that the amended recommendations address many of the concerns raised by parents, students and educators. I am confident these changes will allow us to move forward on the path to providing better options for families." His comments are not likely to quell the anger over the shutdowns.

The SRC decision to close 23 schools came in opposition to months of popular protest over the closures, which are aimed at expanding charter school operations and privatization. Thousands of parents, students and teachers attended numerous public town hall meetings held across the city to voice their outrage over these plans. The *World Socialist Web Site* intervened at these hearings, advancing a socialist perspective in the defense of public education. (See "Mass opposition to Philadelphia school closures")

Coming in the eighth largest public school system in the nation, the shutdowns would be one of the largest mass public school closings in US history. Philadelphia is one of the poorest big cities in the country. A recent US Census finding shows that roughly 40 percent of the city's children exist in poverty conditions. After the SRC's ruling goes into effect, students in many working class sections of the city will be forced to travel outside their neighborhoods to access elementary and secondary school education.

One of the schools to be shut down is Germantown High, which is one of the oldest public schools in the US and would have celebrated its 100th anniversary next year. It will be shuttered along with Fulton Elementary, which sits across the street from the high school. Other facilities slated for closure include 12 elementary schools, two middle schools, two academies and five high schools. Other schools will merge or move to other buildings.

The Philadelphia school closure plan was packaged as a compromise in comparison to the original plan announced last December to shut down 37 schools, nearly one in six schools. The plan announced Thursday night in the end spared four schools out of the final group that had been slated for closure.

SRC Chairman Pedro Ramos said the final plans were "excruciating, difficult and emotional for all of us," but deemed them to be necessary due to the city's estimated $1.35 billion deficit. Such rationales, along with supposed underperformance and lack of enrollment at public schools, have been used by city administrators across the country as a justification to close such facilities.

Numerous reports have in fact shown that mass closures of public schools, when weighed against various countervailing factors, result in very few savings. A 2011 study by the Pew Institute discovered that in a survey of six city districts that had recently closed large swaths of schools, as many as 200 buildings remained idle several years afterward.

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Significantly, not one district had seen “anything like a windfall from such transactions,” the report noted.

The District of Columbia, which saw the closures of 23 schools in 2008, has estimated the cost of these closures at roughly $40 million. Originally the city had projected up to $10 million in savings. The District has recently announced plans to close another 15 schools. (See “One in ten Washington, DC public schools to be closed”)

The large-scale closures of the Philadelphia school district are in line with the policies of the Obama administration and its “Race to the Top” program, which is aimed at forcing cash-starved schools districts to enact standardized testing in order to meet certain grade requirements. Failure to meet such requirements results in the auctioning off of so-called failing schools into private hands to become “turnaround schools,” or their outright closure.

The SRC, the premier body presiding over the School District of Philadelphia, has also overseen the transfer of massive amounts of wealth to the private sector in the form of the widespread growth of charter schools. Last year, a $139 million grant was extended to the opening and expansion of charters within the district. Exposing the lie that this was out of a concern for better education, it was reported that many of the charters receiving lease extensions had failed to produce grade results greater than many of the schools now slated for closure.

A group of Democratic Party officials have posed as opponents of the SRC’s plan. State Representative W. Curtis Thomas commented that the process “was flawed and must be rejected.” Several city legislators have also expressed opposition, with some calling for a one-year moratorium on school closures.

The opposition of city legislators is of a thoroughly unprincipled nature, with councilwoman Jannie Blackwell remarking to the press last January that what council members wanted was merely “the opportunity to have inclusion in the discussion about which schools close” before the SRC came to any final decisions.

The unions representing teachers and other school employees have worked to facilitate school closures in cities across the country. Significantly, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers has offered nothing more than calling for a moratorium on the school closures.

American Federation of Teachers’ President Andi Weingarten addressed the crowd outside the SRC meeting on Thursday, stating demagogically, “Philadelphia is being watched across the county. This is a city that is under fire.” After being refused the chance to meet with Democratic Mayor Michael Nutter personally, she was one of those arrested while attempting to block SRC members from entering a meeting hall.

This reliance on stunts and “civil disobedience” is meant to mask the AFT’s role in sabotaging numerous struggles of teachers, including the ending of a 26,000-strong teachers strike in Chicago last year against attempts to close over 100 schools, which are now continuing.

The author also recommends:

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