

Parents, teachers and students oppose New York City school closings

Steve Light, Alan Whyte, A. Woodson
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The New York City Panel on Educational Policy (PEP) ignored the anger and opposition of parents, teachers and students at its meeting on Monday night, approving the closing of 22 public schools and the “co-locations” of 40 others.

The 22 closings are in addition to 142 already closed or being phased out over the past decade under New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Most of the large, comprehensive high schools and many large elementary and middle schools have each been replaced by several smaller charter schools, many of them private, that receive public subsidy. Many are co-located in the same building, as the Department of Education (DOE) tries to save money at the expense of overcrowding. Twenty-six co-locations have already been approved since the beginning of the school year and another five are on the agenda for March.

These school closings are part of a wave of similar measures across the country, part of a campaign for the privatization of public education in the name of “reform.”

The PEP is a rubber stamp for the Bloomberg administration, with most of its members appointed by the mayor. Most parents, students and teachers are well aware that its votes are a foregone conclusion, and this was reflected in the attendance on Monday night. In an auditorium that has held 3,000 parents, teachers and students at several PEP meetings in the past few years, there were 1,000 in attendance on Monday.

Some schools brought delegations that loudly protested and waved signs at officials speaking on the podium who defended Bloomberg’s policies, while others had little or no representation. It was clear to most that this was no democratic forum, but that its policies had been decided in advance and were endorsed by the whole political establishment, including President Obama, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, and the billionaire mayor. Nor do any of the Democrats competing to take Bloomberg’s place in this year’s election have any principled opposition to his policies of breaking up schools and school communities.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) did not have an

official presence at the hearing. There was a small group from a UFT caucus called Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), which is dominated by the fake-left International Socialist Organization (ISO). The ISO’s political agenda is to cover up for the UFT and its alliance with the Democratic Party.

A major demand supported by many of the prospective mayoral candidates, along with the UFT and MORE, is for a moratorium that could supposedly delay the closings and co-locations until Bloomberg left office. A motion to this effect was made at Monday’s meeting by the four PEP members appointed by the Democratic borough presidents. It amounted to a phony show of opposition to Bloomberg, since it is well known that the eight members appointed by the mayor always carry the majority. A moratorium would at most have brought more hearings that would merely provide dishonest election campaign material for the Democrats, none of whom renounce mayoral control of the schools and none of whom oppose the continuing attacks on education.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed parents, teachers and students at the PEP hearing, discussing the program of the Socialist Equality Party for the independent mobilization of the working class against school closings and for socialist policies to provide all the teachers, resources and buildings needed for a quality education for all.

Gregory Delts, a worker at the Office of Children’s and Family Services, explained, “They plan to close PS 285 in the Bronx. I have two children, one in the third grade and one in pre-kindergarten in that school. I am also the vice-president of the Parent-Teachers Association. This school has been improving steadily. Then they suddenly changed the standards making it impossible for the school to meet the new standards. They want to replace PS 285 with four smaller schools. I think that there is money involved in this since it is very likely that they want to create charter schools.

“The teachers put in a great deal of effort to teach the students. It is not fair to the students and teachers to disrupt all the work that they have been putting in together as a team. Now the students will have to start from scratch. I also

think this will produce a certain feeling of inferiority amongst the students since it is telling them that the schools are closing because they are a failure.

“Some parents support charter schools because they appear to be better. When the school can pick the students, then you get better results. But when you have the same students for public schools and charter schools, there is no difference in performance. If they turn every school into a charter school that hands-picks its students, then education will be elitist. I doubt anything will change from this meeting. They are committed to closing schools. They hold these public meetings to meet certain legal requirements.”

Don Cerrone, a visual arts teacher for 10 years, was formerly in the motion picture industry and now runs the media program at Jonathan Levin High School, targeted for closure. “I want to give the kids a shot like I had. I went to public school, grew up in a public housing project. Teachers gave me the motivation to get moving. I hope they won’t close the school but we’ll continue the fight to keep the needs of the community in mind, to help the kids. At Levin, they put in more English language learner students in the last few years. But when you introduce students in the 11th grade who don’t speak English and still hold them to the state standard, they have low test scores and graduation rates.

“I believe that the people who consider themselves in charge need uneducated, obedient people to do what they want without regard to what anyone wants. You can see that the funding goes down, teachers leave, nothing is fixed. I am sure there is quite a bit of money in it that they manage to profit from. The Democrats and Republicans are close, not much of a well-defined difference. What is needed lies in the voice of the people. I would like to see that but it takes a long time. There needs to be more equality.”

Asked about the role of the teachers union, Cerrone said, “People usually don’t understand that unions support the unions, not necessarily the teachers, as people think.”

The UFT chapter leader at De Witt Clinton High School in the Bronx, Kate Martin-Bridge, has been a math teacher for nine years. Asked to explain the co-locations planned for Clinton, she responded, “There is no explanation. They asked us for feedback. No teachers, parents, students, community members ever said co-locate 2 more high schools into the school because that will help us improve. They have closed schools in other cities, too, but the grades have not gone up. They should acknowledge that New York City is truly a melting pot and reach out. This is where public education can make a real difference.”

A mother from East New York whose daughter attends JHS 292, which is being phased out, explained, “Our school has been around for 100 years. If the school is not doing

well, it is because Bloomberg has not supported it. Anytime he makes a decision he doesn’t really want to hear what you have to say. He just wants to cut, cut. He was wrong by not providing school buses for the kids when he stopped the EPP job protection for the drivers. He is just a selfish businessman who doesn’t care about hurting parents and the children.”

Two Brooklyn College students, Carlos Cabeza and Victor Martinez, explained why they were at the meeting protesting the closings. Victor said, “We used to go to Eastern District High School. It was closed, broken into three high schools. The school upstairs gets A’s because it has better administration and teachers involved with students, more serious programs, as opposed to the school downstairs that had three principals in eight years. I was in that school.” Carlos continued, “The top school gets the most funding, it isn’t really an evaluation of how the students could be doing. They can’t say it is not possible to run large schools because Brooklyn Tech and Stuyvesant are large schools.”

Asked how they saw the larger social situation, Victor answered, “Now the student loan bubble will burst. It is the biggest debt. Troops are coming back and not being helped and getting jobs they deserve and adding to the unemployment.” Carlos stated, “I identify myself as a socialist. It means people not accepting top-down leadership. With the Democrats and Republicans there is a stalemate. There is no way anybody is going to win.”



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