Letter from Washington, DC

Teacher opposes assault on public schools

5 April 2013

The WSWS received the following letter from a teacher in Washington, D.C., where one in ten public schools is slated for closure.

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After hearing for months that our school was closing for low enrollment, it became reality when a team of supervisors arrived from central office in March for a meeting with the staff. It was not so much of a meeting as it was a pep rally. The meeting was so upbeat. The supervisors stood for the majority of the meeting pumping fists in the air. They stated that they would host resumé building workshops and a job fair for teachers at the closing schools.

If there is an art to telling a group of teachers, some who have taught over 40 years, that they must interview for a job to keep a job, then DCPS [DC Public Schools] has excelled. It felt like they did everything but give us a hug and a kiss to ease the pain of having the misfortune of working in a school located in a low-income area. All of us left the meeting scratching our heads and wondering why it felt like we had just come out of a pep rally instead of facing the harsh reality of losing our jobs. Nevertheless, some of us were excited about the "Only For Us Job Fair". This seemed like a way to transition a negative situation into a positive situation.

The day of the job fair, teachers brought their "A" game; dressed up in their power suits with portfolios and Impact Scores ready at hand. They were met with administrators dressed in jeans, T-shirts and sneakers laughing, talking loud and snacking on food bought with our money by the WTU [Washington Teachers' Union]. At a desk, they gave each of us a paper with a list of rooms that contained schools with openings. Teachers were to go to a room that had two or three schools interviewing the teachers all at the same time. It was a cattle call and very demeaning. Teachers were packed inside each room with no order or instructions on what line was for what school, and who was first, next or last to talk to the administrators at the tables. When you finally made it to the table, an interview was held openly for everyone to see and hear. It was embarrassing to see some people being given a lengthy interview, or some being rejected on the spot or being told their papers were incorrect.

Watching teachers trying to focus and shut out the madness and the stares was very heartrending. To undergo a positive interview while being surrounded by eyes and ears of people vying for the same positions would be challenging for anyone. It was also obvious that some administrators were not happy campers for being at the Job Fair on a Saturday because of their facial expressions and attitudes. There was one particular principal who had a negative attitude with everyone that he interviewed. This was a very disheartening process. I was furious. I felt demeaned, dirty, and humiliated by a process that was engineered to help me segue into another position. I collected the five signatures that all access teachers needed as proof of being interviewed and headed out the door. This job fair was a travesty; it was implemented as a formality and not designed as a serious interview process that would ultimately lead to the hiring of teachers.

WTU and AFT [American Federation of Teachers] donated almost a million dollars to DC Mayor Gray's campaign and all WTU President Nathan Saunders could provide us was a donut, some fruit and juice. One would have thought that President Saunders would have asked Mayor Gray for compassion for the sake of the parents, if not for the teachers, because they are the ones who must find the money to get their children to schools outside of their neighborhood and to deal with fights and school shootings after school.

As a teacher in the District of Columbia Public

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System, I have seen the erosion of public education, and now a movement that appears to relocate poor and working class communities by closing their neighborhood schools.

First, you impose a standardized test that requires students to read a passage, which is fine, but if the test is written in a terminology that is not utilized in the home or communities, the students will fail the test. The students are failing not because they cannot read but because of the lack of exposure to books. This is a result of the haves and the have-nots. Only the affluent schools in DCPS with a deep-pocket PTA have access to books, eBooks, functional Libraries and Labs with a full-time Librarian at the helm. The lack of exposure to books and technology breeds a class of students who may know how to read, but have not seen certain terminology, such as the word “ponder.” Students in many parts of DC do not use the word “ponder” in their everyday speech. Ensuring a full-time librarian in every school in low-income areas has been proven to improve reading scores.

Yes, students from horrific home environments can learn, but the skill must be taught at least 10 times. Impact, the evaluation tool used in DCPS, does not allow for the same skills to be taught over and over and does not have a curriculum.

Finally, to penalize the parents by closing their schools because of a lack of resources, to penalize the teachers by closing schools because of an unfair evaluation tool, and to penalize the students by closing their schools because of an unfair testing tool is wrong and horrendous. DC Public Schools, you have failed in your mission to serve the students, to serve the community, and to provide a way out for the majority of the students under your care. Your grade is F.

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