

Chicago school closings target poorest neighborhoods

Kristina Betinis, Jeff Lusanne
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Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel's plan to close 54 public schools by the end of school year—the largest mass closing of schools in US history—will have a devastating impact on working class families in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

Eighty-seven percent of the 400,000 students enrolled in the Chicago public schools are classified as low-income, with the vast majority coming from African-American and Latino families.

The school closings will deepen social inequality in the city, depriving ever-greater numbers of poor families access to public education and other services provided by neighborhood schools.

On the south side of Chicago, as elsewhere, the closings are taking place in neighborhoods pockmarked with abandoned industry, empty lots and foreclosed homes and businesses. Tens of thousands of good paying jobs in steel mills and factories left decades ago, leaving nothing but low-wage service jobs, high levels of unemployment and poverty.

Positions in public schools have provided a rare source of decent jobs, and with the closures hundreds of jobs will disappear from the city. Moreover, the destruction of jobs has been combined with a reduction in a broad range of social services, from public housing to emergency and mental health care.

There is no hospital on the south side of the city that has a Level 1 trauma center despite an increase in traumatic injury from gun violence. In his 2012 budget, Mayor Emanuel cut funding to the city's mental health clinics, which halved the number of facilities to six, forcing patients to travel to more distant, understaffed locations.

Four elementary schools set to close in the south side neighborhood of Englewood—Bontemps, Goodlow, Yale, and Altgeld—have student bodies which are over

95 percent low-income and nearly all African American. Around 45 percent of Englewood's population lives below the poverty line.

CPS officials claim the targeted schools are "underutilized." This is based on an inflated figure of 30 students in a classroom, even though large numbers of the students in the schools are special education students, who, according to state rules, must be taught in smaller classes.

At two of the Englewood schools set to be closed—Altgeld and Goodlow—over 12 percent of the students are in special education. At Yale, nearly one in four are special ed students. The same is true at Trumbull, on the far north side, where over one quarter of the 400 students are in special education.

In order to close Trumbull, the school board is simply ignoring class size limitations for special education students and applying the same measure as general education.

A parent and Trumbull local schools council member reported that the school will be closed outright and not consolidated, with its 146 students split up between three different elementary schools.

Charter and private schools either formally or tacitly discriminate against special education students, ensuring that the public schools have a high concentration of students with physical, intellectual and emotional challenges.

Randy, a kindergarten teacher of 18 years, teaches in a neighboring suburb. He was present at a neighborhood event to oppose the closure of Trumbull elementary school. He told the WSWs, "If you trace it all the way back to the people who founded our country, it is based on free public education. Funding for education has dramatically dropped, even in suburbs like Evanston. It's affected our classroom budgets. We

have had to charge our families classroom activity fees. Where did the money go? Well look at the salaries! The Evanston superintendent makes three times a teacher's salary."

The district has also recently announced it is introducing a restrictive application process and fee schedule for pre-kindergarten classes, which were previously free. The application process requires an in-person application, proof of residency, and proof of income, which are being accepted only from April 4 to May 4 of this year. Pre-kindergarten may cost anywhere from about \$20 to over \$400 per month starting in the fall.

The CPS pre-kindergarten program has been starved of funding since its inception, and different rationing schemes have been used to limit access. Private preschool in the US tends to be very expensive, ranging in Chicago from \$700 to well over \$1,000 per month.

Holly, mother of a pre-kindergarten student at Trumbull said, "Trumbull has a really good pre-K program. We hoped to stay." Detailing the process parents must go through to get kids into pre-K, she said, "The process is pretty overwhelming. You pick three schools, but they'll ultimately decide it. They just announced it and the deadline is only one month away."

Many of the schools on the chopping block offer unique programs that are important in the community, particularly since fewer other options are available after the last two-and-a-half decades of social service cuts. In addition to providing free or reduced price breakfast and lunch—sometimes the only meal poor children get in a day—schools have before and after school programming in education and sports, sometimes in partnership with different institutions. Schools also provide some basic health services like dental cleanings.

Yale Elementary, with class sizes of 20 to 25 students, receives after-school mentors from the Yale Club of Chicago to offer educational help and guidance. The organization also has sponsored musical performances, field trips to museums, as well as helping to improve the infrastructure and supplies of the school.

The shutdown of these critical community resources will have the effect of condemning entire neighborhoods to death. This is not an accident but the

result of a deliberate policy by Emanuel, the Democratic-controlled city government and the corporate interests they serve. Their aim is to rid the city of large numbers of poor people, gentrify neighborhoods and subsidize real estate and commercial development with public funds, including for profit charter schools.

Since the 1990s, beginning with President Clinton's welfare "reform" the Democratic Party's urban policy has consisted of dismantling public housing, promoting private takeovers of public services and city assets, and attacking public education. The latter has culminated under the Obama administration, which has overseen the closing of 4,000 public schools and the destruction of more than 300,000 teaching positions.

As communities brace for the school closings, the Emanuel administration is relying on the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) to push through its plan. While posturing as opponents of the closings—and sponsoring various protest stunts—the CTU has already agreed to the shutdowns and the destruction of thousands of teachers' jobs.

From the beginning CTU President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey—a leading member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization—have only asked that the shutdowns be carried out in an orderly fashion and in collaboration with the CTU. At the same time they have defined the school closings as "racist" in order to divide the working class along racial lines and solidify their collaboration with a section of the black and Hispanic Democratic political establishment.

There is deep popular opposition to the school closings but a genuine struggle can only go forward if it develops independently of the unions, the Democratic Party and their "left" apologists.

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[29 March 2013]



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