

As closures continue, Chicago expands private charter schools

Kristina Betinis
16 October 2013

In the wake of this year's closure of dozens of public schools in Chicago and the layoff of thousands of workers, city leaders are planning additional closures and seeking to attract private charter operators in the northwest and southwest areas of the city.

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) district has released a proposal to continue closures, consolidations, and layoffs for schools slated to be "phased out," or "due to a safety hazard presented by the physical condition of the school." Last November, CPS CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett pledged a five year moratorium on all school closures upon announcing plans to carry out the largest school shutdown in US history.

At least eight additional schools—mostly high schools—are to be phased out in the next two years. CPS is required by law to hold public hearings on planned school closures.

"Turnarounds" will also continue, which involve laying off teachers and staff in a school, and leasing the public facility to a private charter school operator. One hundred twenty-five charters are currently operating in Chicago.

The district's recent proposal goes on to state, "Also, while we do not anticipate needing to take actions due to building conditions, these guidelines preserve our ability to take action in the coming months should conditions change."

That school buildings are dilapidated is but one indication of how starved they have been for funds. During the 2012 Chicago teachers strike, teachers regularly reported that school buildings leaked water or were inadequately heated and cooled. CPS cynically uses the issue of safety when it suits the corporate-backed privatization drive to cut costs by closing and consolidating neighborhood schools.

In August, CPS solicited charter operators for nine neighborhoods where elementary and high schools are overcrowded. In nearby neighborhoods, elementary

schools have been closed outright due to "underutilization," according to the district's extremely high (by national standards) utilization measure of 30 students per classroom.

The district's planned expansion of charters means that the thousands of teachers laid off in recent years will not be eligible for rehire in those schools, a right tenured teachers with high performance rankings are supposed to enjoy, according to the contract negotiated with the district by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

Because the mass closures were such a major issue among striking teachers, this rehiring agreement was touted by the CTU as a major gain achieved in the negotiation of what CTU president Karen Lewis herself called an "austerity contract." In fact, the contract provided no job security for laid-off teachers.

The expansion of privately run charters is a key element of the nationwide effort to shrink and privatize public school systems. Promoted heavily by George W. Bush and expanded under the administration of President Barack Obama, corporate-backed education "reform" and charter schools have likewise been a central goal of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

Charter school teachers in Chicago make on average about \$20,000 less per year than public school teachers. Earlier this year, teachers in the largest network of charter schools in the city, United Neighborhood Organization's (UNO) Charter Schools, were unionized by ACTS, the Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (American Federation of Teachers—AFT), which works closely with CTU.

While CTU has postured as an opponent of the Emanuel administration, it presents itself as a more efficient manager of school closures, consolidations and expanded use of charters. CTU's statement on UNO's recognition of the ACTS union reads, "We are working together to both organize UNO and put the brakes on charter

proliferation.” In reality, exactly the opposite is taking place, as the unions have collaborated with the district to expand charters in Chicago and nationwide, as school closures continue.

As UNO’s chief operating officer Phil Mullins put it, “UNO has participated in a successful agreement with Chicago ACTS [union] and the IFT-AFT. With this partnership, UNO continues to be committed to providing the very best public education for our more than 6,500 students and their families. This also provides an opportunity for UNO and Chicago ACTS to begin to elevate the dialogue around school reform in the spirit of cooperation rather than competition.”

Brian Harris, president of Chicago ACTS, said, “UNO’s actions set forth a reasonable standard for other charter school operators to follow, and we expect them to follow similar law-abiding standards. Instead of taking a hard, anti-union line, UNO has simply followed the law and shown confidence in its employees.”

The aim of the union throughout Emanuel’s attack on public education has been to maintain its own position and dues base at the expense of the teachers it claims to represent. In addition to the teachers already paying dues, the AFT now collects dues from lower paid teachers in the charters. The unions have used these funds to donate generous sums to the Democratic Party, which is now leading the attack on public education and education workers.

According to OpenSecrets.org, the AFT is one of the 25 top political contributors in the US, donating more than \$8.5 million to Democratic and some Republican candidates last year alone. These relationships the unions cultivate—with school “reformers,” charter school management, Democratic and Republican politicians—demonstrate that they are thoroughly opposed to a political struggle against the destruction of public education being waged by both parties of big business.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact