

Detroit's Catherine Ferguson Academy to close by end of June

Thomas Gaist
7 June 2014

Detroit's Catherine Ferguson Academy for Young Women, an award-winning school for pregnant and parenting teens, is set to close by the end of June. The closure was announced this week by Wayne RESA, an agency that oversees charter schools in the city.

The school, founded in 1986, was known for its built-in daycare and preschool programs, which served the needs of young mothers attending classes. CFA was one of only four such schools in the country.

Plans for permanent closure of the school were announced initially in June of 2011. So intense was popular anger against the announcement, however, that the Detroit political establishment announced within two weeks that CFA would become a for-profit charter school instead of being closed outright.

Standing together with Detroit's Democratic establishment as a whole, the group By Any Means Necessary (BAMN), which specializes in peddling racial politics, provided political cover for the privatization of CFA during the summer of 2011.

BAMN national head Shanta Driver claimed at the time that CFA's takeover by a private company would save the school from closure, saying, "This is a victory for the new Civil Rights movement, a victory for everyone." Another BAMN member, Nicole Conaway, chairing a rally held in support of the school's privatization, said, "Keeping CFA open is a major victory."

CFA was then taken over by the private company Evans Solutions Inc., whose subsidiary Blanche Kelso Bruce Academy (BKBA) runs a chain of "strict discipline academies" on a for-profit basis. Multiple BKBA-run youth detention facilities, including Wayne County Juvenile Detention and Wolverine Diagnostic, have been involved in scandals over abusive practices carried out against residents.

Since being taken over by Evans Solutions, CFA enrollment has dropped to a mere 92 students. In a suit filed in June 2013, students and a teacher from CFA charged Evans Solutions with providing inferior education.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a former teacher at CFA. The teacher's comments shed some light on the reasons behind the collapse in enrollment, which was subsequently used to justify closing the school altogether. As Steve Ezikian of Wayne RESA explained it, "The academy is closing because it's not financial viable, and the revenue stream is dependent on enrollment."

The former CFA teacher told the WSW, "I knew that it wasn't going to last once they turned it into a charter. They did that to quiet the uproar. The guy who ran it had ties to the city, so it was easy to transition it to him.

"This company runs juvenile facilities. Why would they be qualified to take over the schools? They treated the girls like they were juvenile delinquents, not students at a regular high school.

"The whole curriculum changed. They didn't have the kids in the classroom anymore. They had some new program they came up with, where the girls would have to go out and find internships, and they would have to go to the internships every other day, and making their own travel arrangements. These are girls who had problems just traveling to school.

"Instead of going to formal classes, they would go these internships," the former CFA teacher said. "They didn't have classes like a normal curriculum. They wanted to avoid buying any books or investing any money in supplies for the school."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party warned at the time, the transformation of

CFA into a charter school was bound up with the efforts of Detroit's political and corporate elite—backed at the national level by the Obama administration—to destroy public education in the city.

In opposition to the Democratic Party, the unions and BAMN, the SEP called for an independent struggle by workers to defend the CFA and public education against privatization.

In a statement written in 2011, “Defend Catherine Ferguson Academy,” the SEP wrote, “At stake in the fight to defend Catherine Ferguson Academy is the basic principle that every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, has the right to high-quality, free schooling.

“Workers must reject the racial politics promoted by groups such as BAMN. They claim that closure of CFA is part of a racist campaign against black and Latino students, despite the fact that many of the people leading the attack—including Bobb and Roberts—are African American. The role of groups like BAMN is to prevent a united struggle of the working class and to keep workers chained to the Democratic Party and the social system, capitalism, that it defends. This type of politics, based on race or gender instead of class, has led all workers into a political dead end.”

In a news analysis piece, “Detroit's Catherine Ferguson Academy to become for-profit charter school,” the WSWS wrote, “The threatened closure of CFA evoked widespread popular opposition among students, teachers and the broader community against the destruction of such a vital social resource. The decision to keep it open has understandably evoked a feeling of relief.”

The WSWS wrote, “A sharp warning, however, is required. The Detroit political and corporate establishment has no interest in defending CFA. Their conscious strategy is to shut down large sections of the public school system, while subordinating the rest to the direct operations of for-profit companies. Nationally, the Obama administration is now spearheading the drive to expand charter schools while slashing education spending.

“The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers, students and the Detroit community to reject the transformation of CFA into a charter school. The defense of CFA must be linked to a struggle to unite all sections of the working class in a common fight against the shutdown

and privatization of public schools, in Detroit, throughout Michigan and across the country. This means a determined fight against the politics promoted by groups like BAMN, which works to divide workers along racial lines.”

This perspective has been vindicated. Far from saving the CFA, its transformation into a charter school paved the way for closure within two years. Efforts to privatize education throughout the city have, meanwhile, surged ahead.

More than half of Detroit's public schools were shut down between 2006 and 2010, with closings continuing at a lightning pace in the following years. By the end of 2013, more than 100 Detroit Public Schools (DPS) schools had been closed, and more than 50,000 of Detroit's youth, some 51 percent of the city's children, were being educated in for-profit charter schools. The most recent plan unveiled by the DPS administration will shutter an additional 28 public schools by 2016.

School closures and privatization are one facet of the plans to “downsize” Detroit by ending provision of public services in poor neighborhoods and transferring their resources to for-profit operations. Detroit is at the cutting edge of an historic social retrogression being enforced to feed the unquenchable greed of the capitalist elite.



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