

Five Boston public schools slated for closure

John Marion
9 March 2015

Once again, workers' wages and benefits are being used by a city as an excuse for imposing austerity measures. With an estimated fiscal year 2016 budget shortfall of \$42-51 million, the Boston Public Schools and their interim superintendent have announced the closing of five schools.

As with previous closings in 2011 and 2014, authorities aim to push through this year's attack at public hearings designed to let off steam. Last year a parent accurately summed up such hearings by stating that "parents work hard to provide for our children and we get reduced to two minutes to beg for essential services."

The cuts imposed by the School Committee last year included the replacement of school bus service with MBTA public transit passes for all students in the 8th grade and above. The callousness of this measure was on full display last month as students were either late for school or had to wake up hours early when the MBTA system was crippled due to a series of snowstorms.

The schools slated for closure in the coming year include:

- Community Academy high school in Jamaica Plain, which has offered small classes and one-on-one tutoring to students who don't learn well in a larger setting.
- Middle School Academy in South Boston, formerly the Gavin Middle School, which was converted to a charter in 2011 by UP Academy, an organization with ties to the Gates Foundation.
- Rogers Middle School in Hyde Park, which has taught children for 100 years and offers not just high-school level algebra but also dance, drama, chorus, soccer, basketball, baseball, volleyball, track and cross country.
- Elihu Greenwood Leadership Academy, a Hyde Park school for grades K2-5 that offers Sheltered

English Immersion along with before- and after-school programs.

- West Roxbury Academy, a business-oriented high school that "partners" with Turner Broadcasting.

Interim Superintendent John McDonough began his letter to parents of children at these schools with the cynical statement that "this is an exciting time in the history of the Boston Public Schools." In the next paragraph he got to the heart of the matter, writing that the school system needs to "maximize resources" and "address the hard reality that we have too many empty seats in some of our schools."

McDonough's pledge to "consolidate half-full classrooms" and close under-enrolled schools means that teachers at other schools will be expected to take on more work without extra pay.

The average BPS teacher makes slightly less than \$90,000 per year in one of the most expensive areas of the country. Librarians' salaries are similar, while clerical and custodial staff make less than \$50,000 on average. Substitute teachers make between \$137 and \$277 per day.

Despite the replacement of yellow buses with MBTA passes, the fiscal year 2016 budget being considered by the Boston School Committee lumps an increase in transportation costs in with salary and benefit increases to calculate a \$58 million increase for next year. The BPS has slightly more than 4,500 teachers teaching 57,000 students in 128 schools.

While students, parents, and school staff are expected to sacrifice, no similar demands will be made on investment firms, private universities, large hospitals, or other Boston employers. In its most recent tax filing, Partners Healthcare, which runs Massachusetts General Hospital and other Boston-area hospitals, reported \$10 billion in revenue and 14 executives earning \$1 million or more per year.

While the Boston area is home to some of the

nation's most prestigious universities, the city's public school system is starved for funds. Boston University has an endowment of more than \$1.6 billion, making it the 54th wealthiest university in the country.

State Street Corporation had revenues of more than \$10 billion in 2014 but paid only \$434 million in income taxes across all of its operations. Abigail Johnson, the president of Fidelity Investments, is worth more than \$13 billion and is 85th on *Forbes*' list of the world's wealthiest people. Boston.com, citing statistics from The Northern Trust Company, estimates more than 7,000 millionaires in Suffolk County.

None of this wealth, however, will be made available to the public schools. Not-for-profits, including universities and hospitals, made payments in lieu of taxes totaling only \$73 million in the year ending June 30, 2014. Aside from real estate taxes, for-profit corporations pay nothing to the city. In addition, corporate taxes make up only about 14 percent of state revenues, an amount similar to that derived from the regressive sales tax.

While the city has offered BPS an estimated \$29-38 million increase from its General Fund for fiscal year 2016—a drop in the bucket compared to the total BPS budget of nearly \$1 billion—that additional funding is partly offset by the loss of \$14 million in state and federal funding. To make matters worse, Chapter 70 local aid from the state to Boston is declining because of the siphoning off of tuition to charter schools.

Local aid, known as Chapter 70 in the state laws, has been calculated according to Foundation Budget and cost-sharing formulas established in 1993 and modified in 2007. This aid, as a percentage of total BPS revenues, has been declining drastically, from 31 percent in 1999 to 11 percent in the current fiscal year.

The latest school closings in Boston occur against the backdrop of a statewide attack that will involve charter school conversions and the possibility of implementing standardized tests tied to the Common Core. On Friday, Republican Governor Charlie Baker announced that Paul Sagan, a venture capitalist, will be the new chairman of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Sagan, identified in the *Boston Herald* as a former "executive in residence" at Cambridge firm General Catalyst Partners, has also been an "unpaid adviser" for MATCH Charter Schools for many years and chairman

of the Mass. Business Leaders for Charter Public Schools.

For his part, Baker is seeking "public input" on whether to replace the MCAS standardized tests with Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, exams statewide.



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