

Meeting on Oakland school closure expresses hostility to attacks on public education

Jonathan Burleigh
24 December 2018

Last Tuesday, over 150 parents, students, educators and community members attended a public meeting to protest the planned closure of Roots International Academy, a middle school that serves low-income youth in East Oakland, California. After listening to district representatives attempt to justify the closure, numerous attendees spoke out forcefully against it and in favor of expanding public education funding and resources.

Roots is one of 24 public schools in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) that are slated to be closed or merged with other public schools over the next five years as part of the district's and state's savage assault on public education, which includes district budget cuts of \$60 million over the next two years. All 24 schools slated for closure or merger are located in the "flatlands" regions of East and West Oakland, where poverty and crime are far more prevalent than in the rest of the city.

In response to this unprecedented attack on education in Oakland, the city's working class residents are beginning to mobilize. Among Oakland teachers, who have been working without a contract since July 2017, there is growing sentiment for a statewide teachers strike to unite with Los Angeles teachers, who last week announced that they will begin striking on January 10.

Two weeks ago, roughly 100 Oakland teachers engaged in a wildcat "sickout" strike, largely out of frustration over the stalled negotiations and lack of initiative from the Oakland Education Association (OEA) teachers union. The union has been dragging its feet and has done next to nothing to prepare teachers for a potential strike.

The OEA has largely been silent on the threatened school closures and budget cuts. Aside from occasional

posts on their Facebook page, it has issued no statement of support to the teachers that went on the wildcat "sickout" strike. The OEA Executive Board waited until last Friday to finally agree to call a strike authorization vote among the membership. They have kept silent about the total amount of money in the strike fund and whether teachers will even receive strike pay, while teachers individually pay over \$100 a month in union dues.

Most parents and students at Roots were informed about the planned closure of the school through a robo-call automated message sent by the district, which enraged many.

The meeting last Tuesday was opened by OUSD Network Middle School Superintendent, Mark Triplett, who said, "We have a difficult conversation that we're about to embark on, and some difficult decisions that we have to make."

In a highly contradictory manner, OUSD Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell stressed the need to "provide a high quality education in every neighborhood" while giving personal testimony about the benefits of attending schools outside her neighborhood while growing up, which every student at Roots will be forced to do if the Superintendent successfully closes their school.

In an effort to justify the school closures because they will concentrate more funding in the remaining schools, Johnson-Trammell declared, "Our goal is to be able to ensure that all schools have the resources they need, and for us to get smaller so that we can deeply serve the needs of our students."

In reality, the proposed school closures will only exacerbate an already dire situation, create more overcrowded classrooms and further drive down teacher retention rates, already among the lowest in the

state.

Following Johnson-Trammell, OUSD's Deputy Chief of Innovation, Yvette Renteria, went through a Powerpoint presentation that detailed the plan for gradually "phasing out" Roots over the coming year. Renteria declared that the selection of Roots was due to "declining enrollment over time. We've seen decreased funds and resources because of that declining enrollment."

The remainder of the meeting was left for Q&A, during which not a single attendee spoke in favor of the closure, expressing the universal support for public education. Multiple speakers praised the teaching staff at Roots, questioned the lack of funding for schools in impoverished areas of Oakland, and criticized the antidemocratic character of the district's management and financial decision-making.

Grandmother Gail Harmond shared that her granddaughter "loves her teachers. She is blossoming at Roots. She comes home every day with nothing but positive things to say. This is the most positive she's ever been. She loves going to school every day."

Harmond then questioned the motives of the district officials and school board, stating, "It seems like you want to send my granddaughter to another school that's already overcrowded. What resources do these other schools have that Roots doesn't have, and why aren't they going here? This is unfair for our children. They deserve to have this school. If they don't have the resources, you need to provide them right away."

Renteria responded callously to Harmond's question, stating, "When it comes to the funding structure, when schools have more students they get more funding." This theme was repeated multiple times, as many questioned the lack of funding for schools like Roots.

Part of the way through the meeting, a student's mother forcefully denounced the school district and living conditions that families face in East Oakland, stating, "I think we're setting our children up for failure. This is ridiculous. We are transitioning them into a society to be robots. We bring our kids to these schools, which are nothing but day-care centers. Look at this community we live in, it's nothing but drugs and prostitution. But they still get up and go to school every day, and now you want to send them to another school that's further away?"

At one point, an attendee asked School Board

Member Shanthi Gonzales, who oversees Roots, whether she would vote in favor of the school's closure. Gonzales replied, "I do believe that this will give our students a better opportunity."

Juan Velazquez, a teacher who used to work at Lakeview Elementary, which was closed in 2012 and converted into a charter school, addressed the audience directly and stated: "Using logic, this is already designed. Using logic and data, there's a bigger thing going on here. You don't have to listen. If your board member isn't going to listen, then the city will come on fire. This isn't just happening in Oakland, it's across the country, an attack on public education. We have to fight for our education and decide what we want. They're not going to close any more schools in Oakland. We're a thriving city, and we need a school and public education system that reflects that."

Mike Hutchinson, an Oakland native and advocate for public schools, related the story of the previous closure of Santa Fe Elementary School, declaring, "They promised us transportation to better schools, and they told us the same false promises they said to us tonight. There's one thing they didn't say: this is not a done deal. They have a whole plan to close 24 public schools in the next five years. This is a displacement effort, to displace our community to allow more charter schools to come in."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact