

Philadelphia's sellout teachers' contract paves the way for mass school closures

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The Philadelphia School District has revealed plans to close several underutilized and deteriorating school buildings, signaling a major shift in the city's public education landscape.

SDP Superintendent Tony B. Watlington Sr. told reporters Monday that, while "there are no fixed decisions at this point... about which schools will close... we can surely say some will." The school board will present proposals this fall and early next year.

The district cited extensive facility issues and declining enrollment as key reasons behind this controversial move. The SDP administration pointed to some schools allegedly suffering from low utilization, costly maintenance and inadequate amenities, while others are overcrowded and ill-equipped, to justify the proposed closures.

The announcement of school closures comes less than two weeks after the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) helped the district forcefully ratify a new contract for its 14,000 educators and school workers. The SDP is facing a massive \$313 million deficit, while state lawmakers from both major parties remain over two months late in announcing plans to fund the state's education system.

Contrary to claims by PFT President Arthur Steinberg, who described the deal as "historic," the contract is a sellout that fails to meet the pressing demands of teachers struggling with stagnant wages and rising living costs. This contract helped the district impose austerity, setting the stage for damaging school closures that deepen the financial crisis.

The contract, sprung on workers after weeks in which the PFT claimed to be preparing for a strike, was a set-up against teachers from the start, done to clear the path for steep cuts to the school system. The same maneuver was used by the Chicago Teacher Union, which pushed

through a similar "historic" contract only for the school district to announce huge cuts a short time later.

The announcement underscores warnings from the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, which warned in a statement calling for a no vote that cuts were on the way. "It is a proven, iron law that as long as a struggle remains in the hands of the bureaucracy, the only possible outcome is a betrayal. The only path to victory is building independent rank-and-file strength and solidarity."

The impact of closures

The announcements stem from a Facilities Planning Process led by the SDP, which released a detailed report and data last week to guide decisions on school buildings. The report compiles data on school conditions, capacity and utilization, program alignment and neighborhood vulnerability to inform upcoming decisions on which schools might be closed, modernized, repurposed or co-located.

According to the report, about one-third of schools (64 out of 215) operate below 50 percent capacity, with five schools more than 80 percent empty. Forty schools received the lowest "unsatisfactory" rating for building conditions, and another 47 were rated "poor," citing serious facility problems such as plumbing issues, lack of heating and cooling, asbestos and general infrastructure decay.

Many buildings in northeast and south Philadelphia have the opposite problem and remain overcrowded. In these facilities, students are forced to learn in hallways, closets or makeshift classrooms because there simply

isn't enough room.

While individual locations have not yet been selected, the list of “poor,” “unsatisfactory,” or “crowded” schools adds up to a far longer list of possible targets than the previous wave of closures in 2013-2014, which saw 24 schools close and displaced 10,000 students. A similar number of closures now would likely displace 11,500 students.

Following the 2013-2014 school closures, many displaced students failed to transfer to new schools; instead, a significant number dropped out. Studies show that while 80 percent of Philadelphia schoolchildren successfully transferred to new schools, 15-20 percent did not.

Research has shown that school mobility—often caused by closures—strongly correlates with increased dropout rates. Mobile students are twice as likely to drop out compared to peers who stayed at the same school.

The Facilities Planning Process report claims that this time, displacements will go smoother, by using metrics that take into account schools located in vulnerable neighborhoods with higher social risks, including safety concerns and lower academic outcomes.

Seeking to ease concerns, Superintendent Watlington and Deputy Superintendent Oz Hill are emphasizing a commitment to transparency and community involvement, highlighting plans for a series of “community input” town hall meetings scheduled throughout the fall.

According to Philadelphia Chalkbeat, which interviewed people participating in a series of advisory group meetings this summer, the SDP's process “has already become opaque.”

“Advisory group members said they took time off work and rearranged their schedules to attend the meetings, often scheduled for the middle of the day,” it reports, only to have their time “wasted by bureaucratic presentations and unspecific brainstorming sessions.” Community participants feared “the district is using them to add credibility to a flawed process, without considering their feedback about how to prevent closures in the first place.”

Cities and municipalities throughout the United States are enacting cuts to social programs and spending.

Los Angeles faces a \$1 billion deficit, with plans for thousands of job cuts, deep reductions in public works, and losses to school programs. The LA Unified School District will lose \$82 million in federal funding for K-12 education, resulting in staff and program cuts. Chicago, with a \$982 million deficit, is considering layoffs and service reductions across departments, including education. It has already adopted a “doomsday” budget in its transit system.

In both cities, teachers have faced or face contract battles sold out by their union leaders. In California, the Los Angeles teachers contract expired in June. The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) and California Teachers Association (CTA) have repeatedly delayed strike action and accepted inadequate, toothless demands in negotiations with LAUSD, despite mounting layoffs, benefit cuts and attacks on working conditions.

In Chicago, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) pushed through a sellout contract based on false claims of securing historic gains, while leaving teachers vulnerable to devastating layoffs and budget cuts.

In Pennsylvania, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority faced a \$213 million budget deficit starting July that forced a 20 percent service cut last month and a 21.5 percent fare increase earlier this month.

Democratic Governor Josh Shapiro approved SEPTA's use of \$394 million in capital funds to restore full service by September 14, temporarily avoiding further cuts. This is a short-term fix that sacrifices funds intended for infrastructure and maintenance projects. No further financial solutions have been offered as the state continues to drain public transit resources.



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