

# “Master Plan” outlines devastation of public education in Philadelphia

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A \$2.8 billion Facilities Master Plan for the Philadelphia School District proposes the closure of 18 schools across the district as part of a sweeping restructuring of facilities. District officials argue that the closures are necessary to fund and enable the plan’s other measures, including modernizing 159 schools, maintaining more than 120 facilities and expanding access to Algebra 1. The changes would not begin until the 2027–28 school year and would be implemented gradually over a 10-year period.

The plan was presented on Thursday, February 26 by Philadelphia Superintendent Dr. Tony Watlington Sr. to the Philadelphia Board of Education, which is expected to vote on the proposal in the coming months.

Under the banner of “modernization,” the district intends to shutter neighborhood schools, redraw catchment boundaries and compel students to travel farther from their communities. Experience has shown that such closures disproportionately impact working-class neighborhoods. The loss of a local public school destabilizes entire communities, eliminating not only classrooms but vital social hubs that provide meals, counseling and after-school programs.

The schools slated for closure include Blankenburg, Fitler, Ludlow, Robert Morris, Overbrook, Pennypacker, Waring and Welsh elementary schools, as well as multiple middle and high schools such as Harding, Tilden, Wagner, Parkway West and Penn Treaty, as well as the only environmental school in Philadelphia, Lankenau Environmental Science Magnet High School.

Under the plan, the district would commit roughly \$1 billion in bond funding and seek an additional \$1.8 billion from state, federal and philanthropic sources to complete the projects.

The proposal marks a decisive stage in the restructuring of public education in Philadelphia and a continuation of policies that subordinate the educational and social needs of working-class youth to the imperatives of austerity and

real estate interests. While officials speak of “equity” and 21st-century learning environments, the plan avoids the fundamental issue: the chronic diversion of public funds away from education and into corporate subsidies, tax abatements and debt service.

School officials present the plan as a pragmatic response to declining enrollment, aging infrastructure, underutilized facilities, high maintenance costs and budgetary constraints. Yet the very conditions invoked to justify these cuts are themselves the outcome of decades of systematic underfunding and the expansion of charter schools—policies supported by Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

The original version of the facilities plan called for the closure of 20 schools, but a subsequent revision reduced the number to 18. Russell Conwell Middle School in Kensington and Motivation High School in Southwest Philadelphia were removed from the closure list after intense community backlash.

The revised proposal was unveiled during a public meeting of the Philadelphia Board of Education that drew a crowd of more than 1,000 people, with additional space opened to handle the overflow. Before the session began, parents and other community members assembled outside the district’s headquarters, chanting “save our schools,” while board members inside prepared to consider the updated plan.

Students and teachers from schools slated for closure warned that the plan would destabilize communities and accelerate the crumbling of city neighborhoods. One student addressing the board urged officials not to “sell us out to pay your debts.”

A second town hall has been scheduled for March 12 with representatives from all affected schools, featuring 60 speakers from the general public and 30 student speakers. Residents will also be able to submit their comments online.

Residents have also raised concerns about what will

happen to school buildings once they are closed, with several properties slated for transfer to the city for redevelopment or other uses, fueling fears that public school buildings will ultimately be converted into private real estate projects.

These concerns are compounded by a lack of transparency in the process, with serious questions remaining about behind-the-scenes involvement of real estate developers in decisions that will reshape neighborhoods across the city. This tension reflects a broader contradiction at the heart of Philadelphia: a city home to immense wealth concentrated among developers, finance capital, and major health and education corporations, yet one where students continue to endure deteriorating buildings, asbestos exposure and overcrowded classrooms.

The last major wave of school closures in Philadelphia, carried out in the early 2010s, demonstrated the consequences of such policies. Roughly 30 neighborhood schools were shut down, displacing thousands of students. Research later found that displaced students experienced increased absenteeism, higher suspension rates and declines in academic performance after being reassigned to new schools.

Despite widespread opposition among parents and educators, and the fact that many of its members will lose their jobs in school consolidation, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) has offered no genuine resistance to the plan—complaining only about the manner in which it has been presented.

PFT President Arthur Steinberg wrote to city officials that the plan “does not provide sufficient detail or data” to justify closures. The union has organized no protests, much less strike action or a citywide campaign to mobilize educators and parents against the plan.

The fact that there is no opposition from the PFT is not a mystery. The union is an adjunct member of the same Democratic Party that controls the mayor’s office and 14 of the 17 seats on city council, which in turn appoints the school board, which in turn appoints the very school administration that is imposing the closures. The entire set-up is controlled by the Democratic Party from beginning to end.

The treacherous role of the PFT bureaucracy was demonstrated during last year’s contract struggle between teachers and the district. Philadelphia educators voted overwhelmingly to authorize strike action after months of negotiations over wages, staffing levels and deteriorating working conditions. The vote reflected deep anger among

teachers over chronic underfunding and increasing workloads.

Yet just days before the start of the school year, union leaders reached a tentative agreement with the district that halted preparations for a strike. The contract included modest wage increases while leaving many of the underlying issues confronting teachers unresolved. The unstated quid pro quo between the PFT and the city administration was that the union would not oppose school closures in any restructuring plan.

By presenting the agreement as necessary to maintain “labor peace,” the union leadership shut down the possibility of a broader struggle that could have united educators, parents and students against austerity policies in the school system.

The lesson must be drawn: The defense of public education in Philadelphia cannot be entrusted to the union apparatus or the Democratic Party that controls both it and the school board.

Teachers, school staff, parents and students must organize independently to oppose school closures and demand full funding for public education. Rank-and-file committees formed in every school can unite educators with broader sections of the working class confronting austerity measures in transportation, healthcare and other public services.

Teachers forming such committees would not be starting from scratch. During last summer’s powerful strike by Philadelphia municipal workers, which nearly brought the city to a standstill before being sold out in the dead of night by AFSCME District Council 33 and the Democratic Party, the Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee was founded to demand the resumption and expansion of the strike, including to public school teachers. The defense of public education, like municipal services, transit and living standards, requires that workers organize together in rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union apparatus that works to block and betray their struggles.



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