

School District of Philadelphia announces 17 school closures, in latest onslaught against public education

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On April 29, six of nine members of Philadelphia’s appointed Board of Education voted to approve Superintendent Tony Watlington’s Orwellian-named “Accelerating Opportunity” facilities plan, setting in motion the closure of 17 public schools beginning in the 2027–28 school year.

This marks the latest in an extended attack by both parties on essential programs, meanwhile the Trump administration demands a record-setting \$1.5 trillion Pentagon war budget. Philadelphia’s children are now directly paying for this war agenda and the demands of wealthy developers in the region.

The plan was a slight reduction from previous versions, which initially recommended closing 20 schools. Of the 17 being shuttered, 12 are located in North Philadelphia and five in West Philadelphia—the most economically depressed areas of the city.

The board’s vote came in defiance of community protests, token disruptions led by City Council members and threats of legal action. When the protests grew loud enough to halt the proceedings, the board fled the chamber and reconvened on Zoom to complete the vote.

During the SDP’s “community hearings,” many residents said they believed the closures were a pretext to hand school buildings over to private interests.

The schools targeted serve predominantly working class and Black communities across the city. Among them are Paul Robeson High School and Lankenau Environmental Science Magnet High School—the only environmental science magnet program in Philadelphia. The full list of schools scheduled to close is:

Elementary schools

Robert Morris Elementary

Samuel Pennypacker School

John Welsh Elementary School

Laura W. Waring School

Overbrook Elementary School

Rudolph Blankenburg School

Fitler Academics Plus

Middle schools

General Louis Wagner Middle School

Stetson Middle School

Warren G. Harding Middle School

William T. Tilden Middle School

Academy for the Middle Years (AMY) at Northwest High schools

Lankenau High School

Paul Robeson High School

Parkway Northwest High School

Parkway West High School

Penn Treaty High School

The plan also carries an additional round of austerity: \$225 million in budget cuts for next school year, eliminating 220 building substitute positions and reassigning 340 school-based roles.

The official justification given is financial necessity. The district faces a \$313 million deficit, and state lawmakers from both parties sat months overdue on education funding as the situation deteriorated.

But the district’s claims are exposed as fraudulent by the plan itself. The “Accelerating Opportunity” master plan carries a \$3 billion price tag. The district claims it can cover only one-third—itsself nearly \$1 billion—with the remainder to come from “state, federal and philanthropic sources.” The money, in other words, exists when the goal aligns with the interests of developers, real estate capital and the private

philanthropic sector that will co-fund it.

The deficit itself was manufactured at the state and federal levels. The Biden administration, acting in concert with Congress, allowed federal COVID-era ESSER relief funds to expire in 2024, including \$1.8 billion in Philadelphia. That move sent school districts across the country off a fiscal cliff.

The Trump administration then proceeded to compound the crisis, slashing Title I, Title II and Title III federal aid and stripping approximately \$69 million from a district where 40 percent of students attend low-income schools. Projected deficits—already \$313 million for 2026—are forecast to reach \$466 million by 2027 and \$774 million by 2030.

The “underutilization” crisis invoked to justify closures—declining enrollment, deteriorating buildings, fragmented funding—is being used to justify privately operated, publicly funded charter schools backed by both parties. The district has shed 15,546 students, a 12 percent enrollment decline, between 2014–15 and 2024–25.

Adding insult to injury: A proposed \$1 rideshare tax projected to raise \$48 million annually was killed after Uber launched a six-figure advertising campaign to defeat it.

Speaking at the crowded hearing in late April, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers President Arthur Steinberg resorted to begging SDP leadership for a more transparent “process” in determining cuts. “Shame on you for having this vote when there has not been enough public engagement and transparency to answer all their questions,” he declared. This amounts to nothing more than a plea to involve the PFT more closely in managing the fallout—and determining the final shape of the cuts themselves.

Steinberg’s idea of “transparency” was on full display last year, during the betrayal of 14,000 city educators in their contract struggle. In June 2025, Philadelphia’s teachers voted 94 percent to authorize a strike—the first in 25 years—against chronic underpayment, deteriorating buildings, punitive attendance policies, mass understaffing and decades of state policy that had stripped them of the right to strike altogether. Simultaneously, 9,000 AFSCME District Council 33 municipal workers voted 95 percent to strike alongside teachers, raising the prospect of a citywide shutdown. DC 33’s leadership sold out the

strike overnight in July, with Mayor Parker’s full cooperation.

On August 26, five days before the teachers’ contract expired, Steinberg stood alongside Mayor Parker and Superintendent Watlington to announce a tentative agreement—with no details provided to members. A union that had run “strike ready” events for months was, in fact, preparing a surrender. The “historic” contract was laden with concessions. Two weeks after ratification, the district announced closures and layoffs—which the PFT sellout had cleared the way for.

The betrayal follows a pattern repeated across the country. In spring 2025, the Chicago Teachers Union delivered a contract hailed as “Trump-proof”—mass layoffs followed immediately. The Austin Independent School District voted to close 13 schools in November 2025, citing the same expiration of federal COVID relief funds.

In San Francisco, a 97.6 percent strike mandate was disarmed after just four days by the United Educators of San Francisco and AFT President Randi Weingarten, with layoffs and closures placed immediately back “on the table.” In Los Angeles, the United Teachers of Los Angeles announced a sellout hours before a strike deadline.

In each case, the common thread is the trade union bureaucracy’s role in containing and derailing the working class’s struggles. The Philadelphia Workers Rank-and-File Strike Committee, formed during the DC 33 municipal workers’ strike in July 2025, pointed to the only correct alternative: independent organization of workers outside and against the union bureaucracies, united across sectors—teachers, transit workers, sanitation workers, healthcare workers—against the common austerity offensive.

As the strike committee declared: “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.”



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