Charlestown High School students walk out to oppose Boston school closures

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Dozens of students at Charlestown High School walked out of classes last Wednesday afternoon to protest its planned closure by Boston Public Schools (BPS) and the administration of Democratic Mayor Michelle Wu. Carrying handwritten signs reading “Don’t replace us, join us” and chanting “Save our school,” the students marched from the school to the Bunker Hill Monument as passing drivers gave them a thumbs-up.

“Since the first day I came to the school, I felt like I already belonged here,” Alexandra Rivas, a seventh grader from East Boston, told the *Boston Globe*. “And a lot of people already feel that way too, and they don’t want to leave.” Aubrey Grey, a seventh-grader who commutes from Brighton, said the closure “would mean losing my friends and the family that we all built together this year.”

That evening students, parents and teachers rallied outside BPS headquarters in Roxbury’s Nubian Square before the School Committee met inside. It was the second protest by Charlestown students this month. On November 2, students marched out of the school after classes, joined by parents and alumni.

BPS has also proposed closing Greater Egleston High School, an alternative school in Roxbury with 76 students, and the East Boston Early Education Center. The School Committee is scheduled to vote December 2 on the closures, which would take effect in June 2028.

The closures follow the district’s announcement in June that more than 500 teachers will be laid off before the 2027-2028 school year. BPS currently operates 104 schools, four of which will close at the end of this school year. The new recommendations would bring the total to 97, and the district aims to reach 95 by 2030.

Inside the November 18 meeting, Superintendent Mary Skipper defended the closures. “There are now more seats than students—many more seats,” she said. Delavern Stanislaus, the district’s chief of capital planning, said BPS had looked for a school to merge with Charlestown High and “ultimately found none.” The district says it will move another high school into the building but has not said which one, and it promises an update on Charlestown in February, two months after the vote.

Students used the public comment period to answer them. “You’ll tell us that we are our future. So prove it,” one student said. “Because if our voice matters, why are we having to fight this hard just to keep our school?”

Students had already confronted the committee on November 4, when Skipper formally presented the plan. More than 100 students and teachers filled the meeting to the fire marshal’s maximum capacity, forcing the use of overflow rooms.

“When you look at Charlestown High on paper, it’s easy to assume that this is not a good school just because we have low enrollment rates,” Tina Lee, a Charlestown student, told the committee. “But what you see on paper does not capture what happens in our classrooms every day.” She went on, “You gave up on us before we even had a chance to explain why we want to protect Charlestown High. … Instead of shutting doors on us, why not invest in our school, support our teachers, protect our community?”

Risa Harris, a senior who came to Charlestown in September after four other high schools, said, “As an immigrant and transgender man, I’ve dealt with bullying, racism and discrimination throughout my entire life.” Before Charlestown, he said, school “was somewhere I learned to survive.” Zoe Dennison, a sophomore, called the school “a safe haven” for students “whether they be low-income, LGBTQ+, of color, disabled.”

Olivia Silva warned that bilingual students and students with disabilities would lose programs they depend on. “Don’t replace us,” she said. “Join us.” Bill Han, who has spent almost eight years in the school’s transition program for students with disabilities, said simply,

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“Closing our school is an insult.”

Gabrielle Antignano, a family liaison at the Lee Academy Pilot School, which the committee voted to close next June, asked, “At what point did dismantling established school communities become an acceptable solution rather than investing in strengthening them? Our families deserve more than listening sessions after decisions have effectively been made.”

Osman, a Charlestown student, pointed to the impact of the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant terror. “You all know that low enrollment of immigrant students is causing these low enrollment issues, right?” he said. “Charlestown has lots of students who are immigrants. They come to Charlestown High School and get the support they need to create a better future for themselves.” The Democratic Wu administration, in other words, is using the enrollment drop produced by Trump’s mass deportation drive to close the school that serves those very students.

More schools are being readied for the chopping block. Stanislaus told the committee that enrollment projections show the district needs to reduce the number of schools “possibly even more so than originally targeted.”

Closed buildings, meanwhile, are becoming investment opportunities. The William Barton Rogers School in Hyde Park, closed in 2016, was sold by the city in 2022 for $100 to a company jointly owned by Pennrose LLC, a national private real estate developer, and the nonprofit LGBTQ Senior Housing, Inc. Its “income-restricted” apartments rent for up to $2,682 a month and are open to residents earning up to $120,000 a year. Meanwhile, nearly 1 in 9 BPS students, more than 5,400 children, experienced homelessness in the 2024-2025 school year.

BPS cites falling enrollment to justify both closures and layoffs. This is the second round of teacher layoffs in three years, and Skipper has threatened, “There will be fewer positions as enrollment continues to go down.”

Statewide enrollment fell about 3 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic, then dropped another 2 percent in 2026 under the Trump administration’s ICE terror, which drove down English learner enrollment by nearly 12,500 students. English learners make up 33.6 percent of BPS students, compared with 13.4 percent statewide.

The other major factor is the growth of charter schools. Between 2000 and 2019, the number of school-age students in Boston rose slightly, from 65,349 to 65,864, but BPS lost nearly 10,000 as charter enrollment in the city increased nearly sixfold, to 11,409. Today 19.6 percent of Boston students attend charters, compared with 5.3 percent statewide. Charters generally cost less per pupil, paying teachers less than BPS and leaving retiree healthcare coverage to each individual school.

The Boston Teachers Union (BTU) bureaucracy has pushed through contracts that leave staffing decisions in the hands of BPS, clearing the way for layoffs. At the November 4 meeting, BTU President Eric Berg noted that the closures would affect 776 students and 193 educators, but he did not oppose closures as such. He asked only for mergers where possible, “more time” before the vote and no closures “unless there is a new building or clearly better school facility” to move into. The union accepts the framework of the closures and asks only for a say in how they are carried out.

The defense of public education will not come from any section of the capitalist class or its political and union apparatus. Workers, teachers and students around the world face the same attacks on jobs, wages and democratic rights, as the ruling class funnels resources into rearmament and war.

In Boston, more than 4,000 Harvard graduate student workers have been on strike since October 27, joined this month by some 2,500 non-tenure-track faculty and researchers, who subsequently ended their strike. In Massachusetts, where strikes by public school teachers are illegal, educators in 12 school districts have walked out in the last seven years.

The BTU contract expires August 31, 2027, at the start of the school year in which the current layoffs take effect. What is needed is not appeals to the School Committee but the formation of rank-and-file committees of teachers, students and parents, independent of the union apparatus and both big business parties, linked through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

These committees should prepare a plan of action against the layoffs and closures, including for a teachers strike next September.

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