

Washington, D.C. parents and teachers oppose school closings, charter schools

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Parents, students and teachers have reacted in anger to a plan to close 20 public schools in Washington, D.C. The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) is holding a series of public meetings this week and next week, even though the decision to close the schools in question has already been made.

DCPS chancellor Kaya Henderson announced this “consolidation” plan earlier this month, citing decreased enrollment and poor performance at the schools slated for closure. This attack on public education follows the national trend of dismantling public education, replacing underfunded schools in impoverished neighborhoods with for-profit charter schools.

Washington, D.C. is one of the most impoverished cities in the United States. Currently, 43 percent of DC students attend charter schools. Henderson’s predecessor, Michelle Rhee, closed 23 public schools in the nation’s capital between 2007 and 2008, a measure that resulted in \$40 million in additional costs to close down facilities.

On November 28, a WSWs reporting team intervened at one of the DCPS “community meetings,” held at Sousa Middle School in Ward 7. The meeting filled the school’s gymnasium with hundreds of parents, teachers, students, reporters and a small army of local politicians and DCPS bureaucrats.

They interviewed parents and teachers in attendance and distributed leaflets of the statement “Mobilize the working class to defend DC public schools!” The team sold several copies of the Program of the Socialist Equality Party to interested attendees.

The affair took on the character of a giant charade, designed to allow parents and teachers to let off steam while Henderson and other officials pledged that they wanted input on their consolidation plan and only

wanted what was best for the children. Attendees were encouraged to sit at one of many lunch tables, each with an assigned “facilitator” from DCPS. This format aimed to preempt genuine discussion and stifle opposition to the school closures.

Before the table-based discussions began, DCPS officials gave a brief PowerPoint presentation about the consolidation plan, which touted lofty goals that are quite at odds with the closure plan itself, such as targets for increased enrollment, higher test scores and higher graduation rates.

After the table discussions, audience members were permitted to make comments. Dozens of attendees lined up for a chance to speak. The sentiments expressed ranged from disappointment to open hostility. One audience member suggested that the DCPS central office should be consolidated instead of the school system.

The WSWs team distributed copies of the statement “Mobilize the working class to defend DC public schools!” and many parents and teachers were eager to be interviewed.

Tiffany Browne, a Ward 7 resident and mother of five-year-old Taylor, opposed the consolidation plan.

“I live just steps away from Davis Elementary, but I send my daughter to Payne because of their curriculum. I opt into the ‘out of boundary’ lottery, which lets me send my daughter to a school that is outside of the district where we live.

“I am happy with the innovative curriculum at Payne, but I have to drive to get Taylor to school, which seems silly when there is a school within walking distance that is just underfunded.”

Tiffany expressed disaffection with DCPS: “They [DCPS] insult our intelligence with meetings like this. They have already made their decision. They always

use so much verbiage to say absolutely nothing. The mission is closing schools. I felt disrespected when [former chancellor] Rhee closed schools in 2007-2008, and now Henderson is doing the same thing, and making six figures too.”

Inbrook Livingston, PTA president at Davis Elementary, pointed out the fraud in DCPS’s claim that closing schools would actually help children.

“The plan is going to close schools with fairly high test scores and then send those students into two other schools with lower test scores. Why is it better to send them to lower-performing schools? The issue of commuting is a major problem too, not just for parents, but for grandparents and other family members.

“Families now have to haul their kids all over DC, and in some situations you have older students who are having to drop off their younger siblings at a school across town. Also, the class sizes are getting too large. When you have 30 students in a class, that is too many. I don’t believe this claim that there is no money for the schools and I hope they don’t close Davis.”

After a lengthy discussion with WSWS reporters, Smothers Elementary School PTA member Judith Moore bought a copy of the Socialist Equality Party program. Moore has had five children go through the DC public school system.

“I don’t see how it’s a benefit to these kids to close the schools in our communities,” she said. “I feel hurt and betrayed by this consolidation plan. It’s discouraging because we have made such an effort to improve things at Smothers. We even solicit our own funding. One of our dedicated parents called up the Ellen Degeneres Show, and they gave us \$100,000 to upgrade our computer lab.”

Judith also scoffed at the claim that there is “no money” for public schools. “You can’t put a price tag on kids and their education. Where will our generation be if we don’t bring them up with a good education?” she asked. “We don’t need more school closures and charter schools. There is no reason that children should not be able to attend DCPS schools from elementary to high school without leaving their own neighborhoods.”

One woman who attended the hearings expressed her disgust with the chancellor and the school board, stating, “They’re going to do what they’re going to do,” and mentioning that school closures were also carried out under Henderson’s predecessor Rhee. She

added, “The new chancellor will follow the old chancellor, just like Obama followed Bush. We’re in the capital of the nation, and this is politics.”

Jushelle, a parent passing by the school with her child, agreed that public education was a social right. When asked about the role of for-profit charter schools in the city, Jushelle said, “They want to make money off of everything, including my baby’s right to an education.”

A DCPS teacher, who preferred to be unnamed, spoke at length about the announcement to close more public schools. Calling the community hearings “disingenuous,” she referenced the recent IFF report used by Henderson to justify the school closings. “It’s a biased report funded by Walmart,” she said. “Those people (the Illinois Faculty Fund think tank) make money off of charter schools; why wouldn’t they call for more charter schools?”

The faculty member stated that charters “religiously” drop students after receiving city funds, which they receive on a per-student basis. This allows them to eliminate students who may have behavioral problems or score low on tests while keeping their schools’ performance scores high. She added that the charter schools intentionally design their tests with a low standard, so that “one student’s A in a charter school would not be an A in one of our D.C. public schools.”

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