

Philadelphia parents and teachers reject school closures

By a reporting team
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Last week, members of the Philadelphia school board held a public forum to discuss closing 37 schools within the district. The discussion took place at John Bartram High School as part of a larger series of meetings in which Superintendent William Hite Jr. and other officials are trying to promote the illusion that the public has a voice in the closure process.

Parents, teachers, and students all voiced their resounding opposition and hostility to the plan. They overwhelmingly spoke out against the decision and refused to accept the platitudes offered by Hite and his associates. An attempt to control the discussion by using a two-minute time limit for speakers failed, and it was clear that the community was beginning to draw political conclusions which extended beyond the “official” framework provided by the political establishment.

The community’s concerns included the elimination of valuable partnerships and resources, the difficulty of having to move or travel further in order to reach new schools, and the potential for increased gang violence as a result of hasty consolidations. Several speakers pointed to a wider political context in which politicians and business interests are trying to undermine public education as a whole. Others urged Hite to demonstrate “moral leadership” and struggle against state cuts to education by supporting a march on Harrisburg, Pennsylvania’s state capital, or some form of legal injunction against the administration of Republican governor Tom Corbett.

Hite answered these urgent pleas in a fashion which demonstrated that he accepts the closures as a political necessity. He stated, “We have no choice in terms of the financial situation. The question is how we use this opportunity to provide better options for students.” When the audience jeered and demanded that he and

his colleagues provide more substantial answers to their questions, he continued to reiterate the same point and urged speakers to face the “reality” of the situation. Hite also said that it is necessary to consolidate schools in order to make funding for them more effective.

Some of the speakers at the forum challenged Hite’s claim and pointed to the systematic campaign to defund public education. One parent mentioned that the Corbett administration’s budget includes \$600 million to construct three new prisons in the state.

This point of view was echoed by a retired English teacher, who angrily denounced the “doublespeak” being passed off as valid reasons to accept the closures. As an example, he mentioned Hite’s earlier statement that parents continue to “vote with their feet.” Even as parents and teachers voice their disagreement to school closures, such decisions are pushed through anyway and are then held up as justification for further attacks. He finished his comment by emphasizing that there is a concerted effort to privatize public education, and that the closures are a part of this larger process.

A school nurse spoke about many district schools no longer having nurses available on a daily basis. She declared that schools need to be given more resources, rather than seeing their budgets slashed and being forced into extinction. The nurse was told that the school system will have to turn to outside sources like private and university hospitals for assistance.

A young teacher working at Bartram claimed that the closures are only estimated to save the district 1 percent of its annual budget in exchange for “destabilizing neighborhoods.” She asked why no one has attempted to secure more money for schools by closing up “corporate tax loopholes” or by “going after the banks.” She concluded, “All you talk about is the deficit, but where do you think the deficit comes

from?”

Multiple parents and students from Bartram, Pepper, Comm Tech, and other schools in the area voiced their fears that the closures and consolidations would lead to increased gang violence and territorial disputes jeopardizing the safety of students. These questions were consistently met with vague nostrums about employing more police officers at schools and tightening security, as well as statements to the effect that it rests with students and parents themselves to model “using reason instead of violence.”

A team of *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to those attending the forum.

Sonia, a parent, said: “It’s dumb to close these schools. Speaking for myself, I need a school to be near where I work, so, if I need to, I can catch my child quickly.” She also said that she has a medical condition that makes it harder for her to travel the longer distance to reach the new school that is being proposed for her child.

Walt, a mechanical engineer and parent, lamented that teachers and staff actually had to pay out of their own pockets to support their children’s schools. When asked whether teachers’ unions were effectively fighting the closures, Walt answered that the unions are so weak that they have to “merge to stay alive” and that “they have their hands tied because of a no-strike clause in the contract.” The WSWS reporter explained that the closings are part of a nationwide, bipartisan attack on the working class. When the reporter asked whether an alternative really exists between Democrats and Republicans, Walt said, “No. Democrats, Republicans—they’re all the same.”

Marquis Pointer, a student at Comm Tech High School, expressed his confusion over the closure plan. “Comm Tech is being closed down and merged with Bertram. Why? Our CTE (Career, Technology, Education) programs are the best in the country!” When asked why he thought the closures were happening, Marquis answered, “One word: Money.”

In an interview outside the school, Keena, a first grade teacher, said she was troubled by a plan to send middle school students to a building currently used as an elementary school. She said that pairing older kids with younger kids was a terrible idea. When asked why she thought Hite and others were closing the schools, Keena answered, “The reason is that they want to take

control away from public schools and hand it over to charters. They aren’t concerned with the mass population.”

Several copies of the Socialist Equality Party’s program “The Breakdown of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism in the United States” were sold.

The Socialist Equality Party will continue to follow the situation in Philadelphia and opposes the closures on the basis of a socialist perspective for the working class. Hite deems these closures to be a “necessity,” but the true necessity is that billions of dollars be invested to reinvigorate public schools as part of the struggle for socialism.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>