

Mass opposition to school closures in Chicago, Illinois

By Kristina Betinis
18 February 2013

Last week, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) district released a list of 129 schools to be closed this year. The closures will result in mass layoffs of teachers and staff. Students will be pushed into the remaining schools while having to travel longer distances and taking on unnecessary safety risks. Most of the schools targeted for closure are in poor neighborhoods and have higher than average special needs students enrolled.

Public opposition to the school closures is immense. A series of public hearings is being held on the closures, where parents, teachers and students are encouraged to plead for the retention of their school, pitting them against the parents, students and teachers from other schools. Hundreds of people have attended each meeting, some of which have been extremely tense. At least one hearing on the north side attracted more than 1,000.

Rita McNeal, a teacher of 25 years from the Austin-Lawndale area, told the WSWS, “When they close one school, it’s a really bad thing. But what they’re doing is like a systematic genocide of poor neighborhoods.”

Chicago Public Schools is the third-largest school district in the US, serving more than 400,000 children. Over 18 percent of all public school students in Illinois attend Chicago public schools, and 87 percent of students enrolled at CPS come from poor families.

Parents, students and teachers expressed outrage at the loss of the schools that anchor their community, and at the contempt shown by city officials for the needs of the city’s population, especially the most vulnerable. Many expressed disgust that people were being forced to beg for something as basic as a public school.

The public hearings are a sham. They are funded by a

grant from the pro-charter school Walton Family Foundation, owners of Walmart, and staffed not by city officials, but by a local public relations firm.

Paulina, a mother of two, said, “I don’t really think these school meetings are going to do anything about these kids either. Rahm Emanuel and the head of CPS are not here. All they are talking about is the bottom line.”

Several organizations attending some of the meetings, including the Chicago Teachers Union, accept the basic framework of restructuring and the lie touted by city officials that there is no money, and complain only that the closures as proposed are racist, implying that shutting down an equal number of schools in white neighborhoods would be acceptable.

The school shutdowns in Chicago are part of nationwide assault on public education, led by the Obama administration and carried out by Democratic and Republican leaders alike. The shutdowns are to make way for privately operated charter schools and the selling off of public infrastructure and property.

One parent, Elizabeth Yarbrough, said, “Squeezing the poor—that’s what all this is about. It’s about money. My children went from public schools to charter schools. And I learned what charter schools are all about: money.”

Plans for mass closings of schools this year have been publicized in other cities, like Detroit and Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, where a similar series of meetings was held, charter school owners are now poised to move in as schools are closed and consolidated, affecting thousands of students and resulting in mass layoffs of teachers and staff.

The Emanuel administration claims the schools are underutilized and need to be closed due to budget shortfalls. In reality, many classrooms are

overcrowded. Recent investigations into CPS class sizes have revealed terrible conditions. Kindergarten classrooms in poor areas have as many as 40 students, including physically disabled students. Teachers are working in such packed classrooms without aides.

At the public hearings, many spoke about how vital the public schools are for meeting children's basic needs, including two meals a day, on-site health and dental care, and social support like crisis counseling. Parents and teachers repeated throughout the meetings that consolidated schools will not be able to meet the needs of all the new students, and that charters do not provide anything like the level of services in public schools.

"How can you do this?" was the question most frequently directed to the panels of CPS's representatives.

Students with special needs will be especially badly affected, since the CPS formula for determining utilization is based on an average class size of 31. At a recent meeting, the principal of Trumbull elementary school spoke on how this formula should never be applied to special education classrooms, whose sizes are regulated by law for safety.

Paulina, who works as a clerk and has a child attending DePriest school, said, "As far as closing the schools, the schools are already overcrowded. Moving children from one school to another is going to make it harder for teachers. Children with special needs are going to be affected a lot. My three-year-old son has special needs and he is going to a school with 7 special needs students. Where are they going to go? What are they going to do with them?"

Many tearful appeals were made by students and parents afraid for the lives of those who will have to travel to other areas when their schools are closed. Chicago has the nation's highest youth mortality rate, primarily because of gunfire.

One mother of six told the WSWS, "If our schools close, we're going to have a territory problem with the gangs, and it's not going to be pretty. These kids are already affected by the violence. They can't go from one school to another without having to worry about their safety."

At several of the meetings, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party delivered copies of a statement, "Socialism and the defense of public education in

Chicago," calling for an independent political movement of the working class. We urge all residents of Chicago and throughout the country who want to take up a fight to defend public education to contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>