

DC mayor to offer closed schools to charter operators

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23 May 2013

A new announcement by Vincent C. Gray, Democratic mayor of Washington, DC would see 12 former public facilities opened up for long-term leasing to charter schools in the District of Columbia, with an additional four receiving short-term rights. The announcement comes days after the rejection of an injunction in Federal court which was intended to halt the planned closures of 15 public schools this year and next.

The facilities are planned to be released for public bidding in phases, starting in July, as city representatives seek to gain a sense of the most valuable properties.

The District of Columbia has the highest concentration of charter schools of any city in the United States save for New Orleans. Over 43 percent of the city's student population is currently enrolled in one of the many facilities which dot the DC landscape. "This process reflects my commitment to helping more public charter schools gain access to appropriate space for their programs," stated Gray to the press. Due to a clause, charter operators must be given first dibs on any newly-available public space in the city over their traditional counterparts.

In January, Education Chancellor Kaya Henderson, who was appointed by Gray, announced the elimination of 15 public facilities, many of which will close in as little as two weeks from now, at the end of the school year for DC public schools (DCPS). "As a city, we are committed to increasing the number of high-quality seats we offer to families, especially in our high-poverty neighborhoods," stated Henderson. In a particularly provocative move, several of the buildings which are currently slated for closure are already being offered to charter operators.

At the time of Henderson's initial school closure

announcement one of the excuses deployed in order to justify doing so was the existence of supposed under-enrollment in the city. This pretext has been exploded by the recent estimate that as many as 22,000 students are currently awaiting to be admitted into one of the remaining charter schools in the District, an increase from 15,000 applicants last year.

Rather than being committed to improving the education of youth, public officials have been carrying out a wrecking operation in DCPS, with Henderson and her predecessor, Michelle Rhee, who closed 23 schools in 2008, seeking to transfer blighted schools into the hands of private operators.

A recent decision by Henderson to broaden the classification of what constitutes a "small school" in the city, in order to reduce the required funding to the latter, typifies this agenda. Under the scheme schools with as many as 400 children will now be classified as "small schools," up from 300 originally. The average school size in the District of Columbia is 400 students. (See, "Washington, DC schools chancellor unveils new scheme to defund public schools")

The decision comes days after a Federal judge released an opinion rejecting an injunction which was intended to halt the slated school closures. The judge, James E. Boasberg, echoing views of DC officials, said that in his opinion the closures were "actually transferring children out of weaker... under-enrolled schools." The judge's opinion was widely seen as being influenced in part by the connections of his brother, Tom Boasberg, who received grants for the proliferation of charter schools while acting as the superintendent of Denver Public Schools (DPS). (See, "Federal judge rejects lawsuit opposing Washington DC school closures")

Though publicly funded, charter schools are privately

operated, and are able to skirt strictures placed upon traditional public facilities. One such allowance is the ability to remove students from the rolls, or outright refuse the applicant if they have special needs. A report released in 2011 by Western Michigan University found that the Knowledge is Power Program, otherwise known as KIPP, enrolled less than half the percentage of disabled and English as a Second Language (ESL) students as do traditional public schools. (See, “Washington, DC charter school wins Race to the Top grant”)

Similarly, another DC charter known as College Prep was found to have suspended more than 50 percent of its total student body in the period of a single year.

As is the case with the closures, all of the newly-offered buildings are to be opened east of Rock Creek Park, a historic dividing line in the District of Columbia between those in the blighted northeast and southeast and those in the higher-income northwest section of the city.

Representatives of the District’s charter operations have responded eagerly to the announcement, having long desired increased access to public space. “We’re pleased.... This is a large number of buildings we’re talking about here,” said Robert Cane of Friends of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS), a pro-charter non-profit that cites the Washington, DC government as one of its “partners” in school reform. FOCUS is heavily involved in the helping of charters seeking to receive licensing permits in the District of Columbia.

Behind the closures and the continuing proliferation of privately-owned charters in the District of Columbia lies the Obama administration and the Democratic party as a whole, who seek to force cash-strapped school districts to introduce standardized testing and performance-based pay for teachers through the implementation of the Race to the Top (RTTT) program—or else be punished by the closing and transformation of traditional schools into privately-owned charters.



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