

With More School Closings, Debate About Policy Continues

by Gail Robinson

Monday, January 31, 2011 12:00 AM



Photo by [Eden, Janine and Jim](#) Norman Thomas High School managed to avoid being closed last year but is on the Department of Education's current list of failing schools.

It does not take a crystal ball to know that many unhappy and angry people will gather in the auditorium of Brooklyn Tech this Tuesday and Thursday evening. Nor does a person need extraordinary powers to predict that most will leave disappointed, if not furious.

On those two nights the [Panel for Educational Policy](#), the powerless body that replaced the former city Board of Education, will hear public comment and then vote on proposals to close some 24 schools across the city, all schools the Department of Education has determined fail its students and are so far gone they cannot be saved.

The votes on Monday and Wednesday represent the latest round in the Bloomberg's administration's drive to close poorly performing schools -- many of them traditional large high schools but middle and elementary schools as well -- and replace them, some with smaller schools, including a number of charter schools. Although the city started shutting schools years ago, the agreements over the efficacy of the policy in general and the closing of some specific schools has not abated. Like so much in education debates today, the dispute encompasses an array of issues including how to help the city's most disadvantaged students and the role of charter schools.

Troubled Schools

No one denies that the schools on the phase-out list have problems. They tend to have low test scores and poorer attendance and lower graduation rates than most city schools -- even similar schools.

The Department of Education believes closing a school and starting a new one in its stead can change the building's culture. Education officials also have concluded that many city teenagers fare better in smaller schools and so have shut large high schools to make room for the new schools, many of which have only a few hundred, as opposed to a few thousand, students and focus on a theme, such as arts or the environment.

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Of course, the effort does not always succeed. In fact a few of the small schools turned up on this year's closure list. In general, though, schools Chancellor Cathie Black [said](#) in a recent appearance on

[Inside City Hall](#)

, the policy works. "When we re-do the whole structure -- the physical outside stays the same, new schools go inside -- this group of kids and this group of kids are performing better -- 20 and 30 percentage points better. Nothing has been changed on the outside except for the level of commitment and teaching and effectiveness that's going to hopefully impact that child in a positive way," Black explained.

Slated for Shutting

The Panel for Education Policy will vote on 24 school closing this week and almost certainly approve them after they hear public comments. The meetings are at Brooklyn Tech, 29 Fort Green Place at 6 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 1

[Metropolitan Corporate Academy High School](#) (Brooklyn)

[Paul Robeson High School](#) (Brooklyn)

[School for Community Research and Learning](#) (Bronx)

[Urban Assembly Academy for History and Citizenship for Young Men](#) (Bronx)

[New Day Academy](#) (Bronx)

[Monroe Academy for Business/Law High School](#) (Bronx)

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[Academy of Environmental Science Secondary High School](#) (Manhattan)

[I.S. 195](#) Roberto Clemente School (Manhattan)

[Kappa II](#) (Manhattan)

[Academy of Collaborative Education](#) (Manhattan)

[I.S. 231](#) Magnetech, (Queens)

Thursday, Feb. 3

[P.S. 114](#) Ryder Elementary (Brooklyn)

[P.S. 260](#) Breuckelen School (Brooklyn)

[P.S. 332](#) Charles H. Houston School (Brooklyn)

[M.S. 571](#) Bergen Upper School (Brooklyn)

[Frederick Douglass Academy III \(Bronx\). This proposal would close only the middle school grades. The school would continue as a high school, with grades 9 through 12.](#)

[John F. Kennedy High School](#) (Bronx)

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[Christopher Columbus High School](#)

[Global Enterprise High School](#) (Bronx)

[P.S. 102](#) Jospeh O. Loretan School (Bronx)

[Performance Conservatory High School](#) (Bronx)

[Norman Thomas High School](#) (Manhattan)

[Beach Channel High School](#) (Queens)

[Jamaica High School](#) (Queens)

The hearing at [P.S. 30](#) on whether to close the school was canceled because of snow. As a result, the panel's vote on that has not yet been scheduled. The panel does not have to vote on the proposed closing of [Ross Global](#) in Manhattan -- actually a revocation of its charter -- because it is a charter school.

For more on the schools slated for closing go [here](#) and [here](#)

Opponents of the closings, including the [United Federation of Teachers](#) , say the administration has burdened the schools on the closing list with some of the system's most difficult students -- the homeless, English language learners, student who have been left back one or more times and so on -- setting the schools up to fail. In addition, they charge, the new schools may not accept the kind of students who now attend classes at places like

[John F. Kennedy High School](#)

or

[Norman Thomas High School](#)

Many critics also see a hidden agenda. With publicly funded, privately run charter schools set for many of the buildings now occupied by endangered schools, they charge the school closings represent part of a larger strategy to privatize public education. The administration, though, counters that charters are public schools and provide choice to the parent who need them most -- the kinds of parents whose children now attend the schools the city wants to close.

This Year's Round

Teachers union president Michael Mulgrew, an outspoken opponent of many school closures, has noted that the city has been shutting down bad school for at least 25 years. But during the Bloomberg administration, it became a cornerstone of city policy, with the chancellor -- as Mulgrew put it at a recent forum --- "trumpeting" the closing of schools.

Under Bloomberg, the city has shut more than 90 school and opened [335 schools](#) , many small, both conventional schools and charters. And over time, the closings have become more, rather than less controversial, possibly because the schools shut in the policy's early stages were widely seen as awful. With fewer truly appalling schools left -- and with the city even shutting schools with decent ratings on their progress reports or report cards -- the schools on the closing lists are more likely to have loyal supporters.

Not all do. Last year when the city proposed shutting [Kappa II](#) no one appeared at the hearing to defend it. This year there again seems little , if any, opposition to the move even though Kappa II will not even have the luxury of being phased out over a few years. If the panel approves, it will simply be shut.

By 2009, the closing policy had grown so controversial that it was one of the few aspects of mayoral control the state legislature decided to tweak when it renewed the school governance law. Under the [new rules](#) , the education department must prepare an impact statement on each proposed closure and hold public discussions on its plans. In addition the Panel on Educational Policy must approve any shutdown, phasing out or significant change in the use of a school building.

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Last year, the city did not seem to take these requirements particularly seriously -- to its eventual regret. The teachers union and the [NAACP](#) filed [suit](#) , charging the administration had not complied with the state law. The courts agreed , infuriating the mayor and stopping some 19 closures in their tracks.

Undaunted, the city [came back](#) in December with 25 proposed phase-outs and closures, including one charter school, [Ross Global](#)) . Four schools slated for closing last year got a reprieve:

[Choir Academy of Harlem](#)

's high school grades,

[Maxwell Career and Technical High School](#)

, the

[Middle School for Academic and Social Excellence](#)

, and

[Business, Computer Applications, and Entrepreneurship High School](#)

. Fifteen, though, were back on the list along with 10 new ones (see list above right).

To stay in the law's good graces, the Department of Education has offered a stream of paper to back up its plans and held hearing at schools, where, in contrast to their largely stone faced silence (with occasional glances at their Blackberries) in past hearings, school officials actually [interact with](#) and respond to members of the public.

That though, has not silenced the debate.

Helping Those Who Need Most

Last year when the Panel on Educational Policy held its meeting on closing schools, the crowd fell silent when, Rebecca Freeman, a senior at [Paul Robeson High School](#) , came to the microphone holding her baby daughter and

[urged the panel](#)

to keep her school open. Bridling at charges that Robeson fails its student. Freeman declared, "I am not a failure and I will never be a failure. â€ And neither will my daughter."

Freeman attended a special program for students with children at Robeson. The school in Crown Heights, many speakers said, tried to help a very difficult student body.

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Many other schools on the closing list could echo that claim. A [report](#) issued last week by the Independent Budget Office compared the schools on the closing list with city schools as whole and found, for example, that the high schools slated for closing had a far greater percentage of special ed students -- 18 percent compared with a citywide average of 12 percent -- and slightly more English language learners. While 52 percent of high school students citywide are considered low income, 63 percent of those in the endangered schools are. More than twice as high a percentage came in over age at the schools on the closing list, and they had lower scores on their eighth grade tests.

The differences for elementary schools were far less pronounced.

The city has said that, in deciding whether to close a school, it compares that school to other schools with similar student populations. Critics question that.

The critics also say the closings have a domino effect, putting previously well-functioning high schools at risk as the most challenging students from schools being shut go, not to the small themed high school now occupying the building, but to large high schools that essentially accept anyone. And so [Beach Channel High School](#)'s fate, many believe, was sealed when the Department of Education shut nearby Far Rockaway High School.

Under Bloomberg, closing schools, "has become an educational shell game that defers instructional problems until they reappear elsewhere, to be met again with a similar reaction," David Bloomfield, head of the education department at the College of Staten Island has [written](#)

Meanwhile, the better students at the struggling schools may leave, preferring the smaller more selective schools now available to them. Last year, Christine Rowland, a teacher at [Christophe r Columbus](#) and advocate for that school, said that Columbus' top students tended to enroll in new programs set up in and around that school. This left Columbus, she said, having to deal with classes that are "more challenging both academically and behaviorally."

Some warn, this year closings could topple more dominoes.. As large schools throughout the

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Bronx close, Mulgrew said last week, [Dewitt Clinton High School](#) has seen its special education population go up by some 37 percent and the number of homeless students double. "If the Department of Education does not intervene and help this school and support them in their challenges," it will be on a future closure list, he said.

Preventing Failure

The teachers and parents who come to the microphones at the public hearings often argue that the city should have done more to help the schools, rather than shut them down. The city counters that it tried but that in these cases, efforts to improve the school simply did not work.

While parents and teachers maintain the schools slated for closure have been starved of resources, the Independent Budget Office report tends to refute that. It found the closing schools -- at all levels -- had slightly more staff for each student than the city average and that, at the high school level, those teachers were a bit more likely to be "highly qualified" or to have graduate degrees.

At some of the schools, though, anecdotal evidence suggest the department could have done more to help. The most extreme case cited by some elected officials, as well as parents, is [P.S . 114](#)

in Canarsie. Certainly the school is hardly a model of academic excellence, with only a third of its students meeting standards on state tests and with parents and teachers giving it failing grades.

Many in the school though have told reporters and city official that the fault lies with the former principal Maria Penaherra, who according to an education department investigation, committed ["serious misconduct,"](#)

including faking financial documents and using school funds to pay for traffic tickets. She finally was removed, NY1 reported, "because one day when she failed to show up to work, a carbon monoxide alarm went off and students were kept in class. This, because the school had no safety plan and she had left no one in charge. She also left the school \$180,000 in debt."

By then, though, the damage had been done, prompting the education department to propose closing it. But may supporters of the school question whether that is the proper response. "The solution is to fix it, not avoid it," the area's City Council member, Lew Fidler, has said. P.S. 114 "had been a terrific school in the past," he continued, "until it was shot in both feet by a DOE principal. This school should succeed. I know this city's agenda is charter schools -- but they

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sent one principal in to wreck it, one to chronicle it and one to close it."

To add to parents' dismay, P.S. 114's building, under the city's plans, will be occupied by a charter school -- one too small to accommodate all the kids who now go to P.S. 114.

The Charter Solution

The conflict over charter schools underlies much of the debate over the school closures. Not all of the phased out schools will be replaced by charters -- some will be home to regular public schools, and the plans for some have not yet been determined, or at least disclosed -- but charters will replace some of them, including [P.S. 332](#) and [M.S. 571](#), both in Brooklyn.

The challenge facing the city is clear: It supports charter schools but has problems finding space for them, a difficulty exacerbated by the high cost of real estate in New York and restrictions preventing charters from using public money to build facilities. To solve that dilemma, the city has [put charters in regular public school buildings](#) -- a practice that continues to cause battles among parents in some parts of the city -- and placed charters in phased out schools.

Two charters, created by [New Visions](#), will move into the John F. Kennedy High School building in the Bronx, as that school begins its phase out. Community residents learned of this through a [leak](#) to the New York Times, even as city officials had been telling the area's elected officials they had not finalized plans for Kennedy. When the plan appeared in the Times, education department spokespeople dismissed it as just a draft. Now, though, New Visions Charter High School for Advanced Math and Science and New Visions Charter High School for Humanities seem set to open at Kennedy in September.

The maneuvering irritated even those who see reasons for closing Kennedy, such as Marvin Shelton, president of the District 10 Community Education Council. He [told](#) Manhattan Time News, department officials "just seem to shoot themselves in the foot â€¦ It may be a great product [coming in], but why do it this way?"