



ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN

Helping children succeed in school

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PRESS RELEASE

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STATEMENT ON PROPOSED SCHOOL CLOSINGS

January 22, 2010. The following is a statement by Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. in response to the New York City Department of Education's proposal to close twenty additional schools.

We believe that all of New York City's children deserve excellent public schools. Too many of our city's schools continue to fail our students. We need ambitious and creative school reform strategies to raise the quality of education for all children in the system, including those students who present the greatest challenges.

What we do not need, however, are reform strategies that leave the most vulnerable students behind or place additional hurdles in their path to graduation. Under the leadership of Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) has pursued an aggressive policy of school closure, which appears to target schools that, as a group, serve disproportionately large numbers of the city's most at-risk students. A number of the schools – such as Jamaica High School, Columbus, Norman Thomas, and Global Enterprises – have a strikingly high percentage of English Language Learners. Moreover, the schools targeted for closing this year have student bodies that are 17.79% students with documented special education needs (compared to 15.46% citywide), and they have a higher percentage of special education students in self-contained special education classes (8.03% for closing schools, compared to 6.55% citywide), which would tend to indicate a greater level of educational need.

These disparities would be less troubling if we knew that the students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and other at-risk populations in schools previously closed had actually benefited from the closures, but we have seen little evidence of actual benefit to these students. In fact, in the closing school we studied most closely, we saw at-risk students being pushed to leave high school prematurely for GED programs, which are unlikely to meet their needs.

This data, therefore, raises a number of serious concerns that the DOE needs to address publicly:

- Does a school's willingness to serve a diverse population with multiple challenges, including students who are less likely to graduate in four years, make it a target for closure?

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- What happens to English Language Learners and students with special education needs when their schools are closed? How will the DOE monitor the impact of the closings on these populations? To ensure that the closings do not prompt schools to discharge at-risk students illegally, AFC calls upon the DOE to make discharge and transfer data for all closing schools publicly available during and after the phase-out process. The data should be broken down by discharge code and tied to demographic information, including race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and English Language Learner status.
- The DOE typically takes three years to phase out a school, which suggests that students currently enrolled can remain there through graduation. What is the DOE's plan to make sure that currently enrolled students receive the educational support and opportunity they need to stay in school and ultimately graduate? How does the DOE ensure that students who prefer to leave the closing school are advised of other opportunities? What happens to current students who do not have the skills or the credits to graduate in four years?
- Staff in closing schools have told us that English Language Learners and students with special education needs have a harder time transferring out. The new, small schools that replace the schools that are closed have rarely offered the bilingual or dual language programs or the range of special education supports and services that the larger schools have provided. What is the DOE doing to increase the supply of attractive high school options for English Language Learners and students with the broad range of special education needs?

We agree with the DOE that sometimes, it may be the best course of action to close a school that is failing the majority of its students. However, the decision to close a school has a profound impact on current students, potential students, and students at surrounding schools remaining open. The DOE is responsible for educating each and every one of these students, including those who need the most support. The DOE must assure the public that its aggressive approach to school closing is not inflicting collateral damage on the city's most vulnerable students.

For more than 38 years, Advocates for Children of New York has been serving the most educationally vulnerable students in the New York City public schools and speaking out on their behalf. More information on the organization and its programs is available at www.advocatesforchildren.org.

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