Proposed School Closings Add One More Straw on Camel's Back

As we head to spring carefully (we hope) and avoiding any more snow cancellation days, it’s appropriate to stop and pause to review a few things. Not that we have anything else on our minds...proposed school closings, excessed teachers, budget shortfalls resulting in serious and harmful cutbacks, SEI-related excessings, ELT preparation, provisory teacher rehiring process, additional Turnaround Schools coming on line, testing and more testing, worries about the school calendar, and parking difficulties (or impossibilities) making it very hard to have the time to worry about anything else. The aforementioned issues keep us busy every day and keep teachers’ rooms humming 24-7.

Let me talk about a few of these.

Assuming the school department goes ahead with the school closing proposal, which as of this writing is scheduled for March 25, more than 1,000 students and a few hundred staff will be disrupted. These decisions came without warning and without any deliberative procedures -- to all schools involved regarding the list of issues with which we disagree. If the district continues to recruit even more new teachers.

We need to be able to work with the school department on a plan to absorb surplus teachers and paraprofessionals into positions more suitable than the current system allows. Instead of trying assiduously to place excessed people in suitable teaching positions, the school department has proved unsuccessful. Instead of trying to work this out. The continual churning of staff in our schools does no one any good. It is disruptive to students and costly to the district. More than that, it harms morale.

In a closely-related matter, we also have concerns with the potential of hundreds more educators excessed for allegedly not complying with a state mandate/Department of Justice Memorandum on obtaining an SEI endorsement. A full explanation of this is well beyond the scope of this piece, but suffice it to say that the excessings are by and large improper and all members who received an excessive notice are asked to contact Patrick Connolly in the BTU office.

The list of issues with which we disagree with the district often is daunting and overwhelming and speaks to what amounts to some measure of distrust between the school department and our union members. After all, if we are truly ‘all in this together’ then how and why were our members not consulted before their schools were chosen for possible closing? Why aren’t we listened to on other matters of great importance such as school closings, testing protocols, whether or not inclusion is being implemented fairly and appropriately, whether budget priorities are misplaced, and so on? While we all want our schools to do well, our schools’ chances of inclusion is being implemented fairly and appropriately, whether budget priorities are misplaced, and so on. While we all want our schools to do well, our schools’ chances of success would improve if the district listened to us before it acted.
Commentary by Garret Virchick

BPS Budget Leaves Out Most At-Risk Students, Too Expensive to Educate

I n yet another budget cut to the Boston School administrators on Saturday announced the closing of five schools, heading two alternative schools, the Community Academy in Jamaica Plain and the Middle School in South Boston. What the administration won’t tell parents is that this decision will disrupt learning for every student in the already over-crowded schools that will be required to absorb the additional 150 students from the alternative schools.

As a Boston high school teacher who has also taught in alternative schools, I can attest that more – not fewer – alternative schools should be part of any plan to improve our inner-city school system. Yes, alternative schools are expensive. But they are expensive because the children placed in them have, for the most part, lived in extreme poverty or aberrant situations that place them at great emotional and behavioral disadvantage. These students have enormous intellectual potential, and they can be helped. Alternative schools were established to accommodate children that focus on their unique and overwhelming needs.

The widening gap between rich and poor is not simply an economic statistic. Poverty brings drugs, crime, and violence – and it damages some children. These children, when placed in regular classrooms, act out in ways that would shock most of us, ignoring instruction, defying teachers, regularly starting fights in the hallways, and constantly disrupting and frustrating their classmates who are there to learn.

When I started teaching high school 30 years ago, the one thing that everyone was certain of was that time on task – and not a score on a standardized test – was the best measure of whether a child was learning. During my years in the classroom, I’ve seen the very real consequences of poverty. Yet the time we are able to spend actually teaching has declined due to the growing behavioral problems that we deal with as we manage the disruptions that children of poverty sometimes bring into the classroom.

Another issue resulting from the school board’s plan to reintroduce these children to regular school is that they will be mixed in with students who are already on waiting lists for alternative seats that are not available. This will sometimes mean mixing two students who have had past conflicts back into the same school together. The resulting chaos and lost learning time will affect every child’s learning.

Once again teachers are being asked to solve society’s problems with fewer resources. We will be chastised for not being able to “differentiate our instruction” so that all the children in a classroom can learn. But the hard reality in the classroom every day is that the emotional and behavioral issues that children of extreme poverty carry into the schools cannot be “fixed” by adjusting lesson plans.

Are there solutions? The answers will first require asking the right questions: Are we offering the right types of courses to help these students progress? Do we have enough counselors to provide the emotional support they crave? How do we persuade taxpayers and legislators to fund schools based on need?

Since the right questions are rarely asked in the halls of power I am skeptical. But the current mass closures are a shell game. Budgets are not set based on clear demands. Here are a few suggestions:

- The BPS would get a steady supply of well-qualified candidates. Those selected would have great performance interpersonal skills to ill administrative representatives who have great performance.
- The BPS must ensure that the newly promoted could work in cohorts to recoup their investment. More than just a waste of time and talent, such a promotional practice. As for licensure, the administration won’t tell parents is that this decision will disrupt learning for every student in the already over-crowded schools that will be required to absorb the additional 150 students from the alternative schools.

The current politics of education funding is a shell game. Budgets are not set based on students’ needs. They are based on available funding. But only a few politicians will tell you that available funding for the common good is determined by a tax code that is often written by the very groups that have had a hand in the widening of the wealth gap. State capitals and the Nation’s capital are awash in PAC money that buys political influence. This political influence determines funding bills, budgets, and whose taxes will be cut.

Fifty years ago the War on Poverty started to address the problems that come with economic instability. But 40 years of rhetoric and political maneuvering by the moneymakers interests have wiped out most, if not all, of the gains found in that initiative. Nixon’s Law and Order rhetoric was followed by Reagan’s War on Drugs. The assault on poor communities commenced. (Please read Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow.) Bush’s No New Taxes opened the door to Clinton’s giving free rein to Wall Street with the repeal of the Glass/Steagall Act. The wealth of the country was redirected. Bush I’s War on Terror stole the money needed for No Child Left Behind. And Obama’s Race to the Top muds schools compete for the funds that must would not receive. The Tea Party and “it’s all about me” Libertarian rhetoric is now the order of the day. If the War on Poverty was waged because the civil rights movement demanded it then a new movement is necessary before the poverty problem can be addressed. Like all movements it needs to be one with clear demands. Here are a few suggestions:

- A thorough needs assessment for every school must be made with significant input from the educators that are on the front lines.
- Tax codes must be rewritten to fully fund public education. This tax code cannot shift this burden onto an already stressed middle class. A threshold income must be set for individuals with increased taxes on income over that threshold. More than $250,000 sounds like a good start. If that can’t be accomplished in 1 year then a 5 year commitment must be made with increasing taxes each year to meet the goal of full funding.

A redirection of funding away from all wars, including the war on drugs, towards anti-poverty and drug rehabilitation programs. Funding for infrastructure that brings good middle class income jobs to working people. Children learn best in homes that are economically stable.

The civil rights movement brought needed change to the country. But we need a new movement, one that puts people before corporate greed. Our union needs to be a part of this movement for social justice if we are to get the schools we all deserve.

Commentary by Michael J. Maguire

Proven Leadership

E ven though Dr. Tommy Chang has just been chosen to be Boston’s next superintendent, our schools still face a crisis in leadership. Over the past few years turnovers have been vast and frequent in high ranking administrative positions. More than just losing institutional knowledge, the current mass exodus means that too many of our new leaders will have a lot of catching up to do before we can all move ahead.

In the schools themselves far too many principals have little or no classroom experience. Even worse, too many of those who manage the principals and report to our new superintendent are far removed from real classroom experiences. If we are to improve education in a meaningful way, we need look no further than our experienced classroom teachers.

I emphasize experienced because it takes years for a good teacher to become great, and more years for a great teacher to become masterful. Sadly, leadership positions advertised within the BPS ask for a mere three years of teaching experience. Three years is a woefully inadequate prerequisite. Just as an example, it often takes teachers five years to move from their initial license to proficient. How can the BPS claim its leadership positions are a candidate pool that more than likely has not even obtained the highest level of teacher licensing?

Even worse than the ineptness, the BPS expects applicants to already have their principal’s license at the time they apply for the position. Such a prerequisite may seem like a good idea, but what it really does is encourage teachers to spend hundreds of hours in graduate school or internships instead of focusing on improving their teaching. More than just a waste of time and talent, it perpetuates the practice of using teaching as a stepping stone for other endeavours.

Even worse still, teachers who invest so much time and money into a principal’s licensure program will inevitably apply for management positions far and wide in order to recoup their investment.

Fortunately the BPS has a ready supply of teacher who are willing and capable to take on leadership roles: union representatives. Each BPS school has one or more Boston Teacher Union building representatives whose primary role is to ensure compliance of the collective bargaining agreement between teachers and administrators. The union representatives are elected annually by their peers, give of their time to help other teachers, and know the contract provisions better than most administrators.

These union representatives are teachers who love the classroom and work to improve school. What better group of potential leaders could there be?
What is the Role of the School Site Council's Personnel Subcommittee in Hiring?

1.3.) Interview and approve the hiring of BTU teachers’ bargaining unit staff, the in-transfer of BTU teachers’ bargaining unit staff from other BTUs and from the in-transfer BTU personnel Subcommitte (TPPP) formerly comprised of teachers who would participate in the excess pools process.

2.3.) Determine the schedules and procedures for reviewing candidates for positions.

The Personnel Subcommittee is comprised of the Principal/Headmaster, two teachers and one parent as well as one student on the high school level (who are elected members of the SSC). Decisions are made by majority vote and are not subject to the approval of the School Site Council as a whole. The Personnel Subcommittee is responsible for interviews for all hires made from the beginning of one school year through the end of the last school year.

There is a way to involve others on the Personnel Subcommittee who may have expertise in a particular area to be filled. Teacher and parent representatives on the SSC may be given temporary representation on the Personnel Subcommittee according to the positions being filled. These temporary replacements do not need to be members of the SSC. For example, a special education teacher may replace a teacher on the Personnel Subcommittee when a special education position needs to be filled, or if the Parent Participation Coordinator or Parent Council chair (if any) choose to do so. The administrator can not appoint people that they choose. It is up to the SSC to choose the specialist to represent their area on their own to elect the two that will be the BTU Personnel Subcommittee members. It is prudent to also elect an alternate in case one of the two selected is unable to participate on a particular day/time. BTU members are not obligated to select someone that possesses a particular expertise that is a BTU member to serve on the Personnel Subcommittee. It is entirely up to the BTU SSC members as a whole to decide this option on their own. They are not compelled to do so by the administration. The same is true of the parent members. SSC parents select their own member to serve on the Personnel Subcommittee as their representative by causing an unaffiliated member to do so on their own. On the high school level, the two elected SSC student members also select which one of them will serve as a member of the Personnel Subcommittee.

What is a Brief Overview of the Personnel Subcommittee in Hiring?

What Does BPS Want to See in a Portfolio When One Goes on an Interview for a Position?

What is a Brief Overview of the Personnel Subcommittee.

According to the BPS OIC, what the district is encouraging when participating in a job interview is for candidates to bring a professional portfolio that includes four to six items that reflect the teacher’s practice. They suggest that each item be accompanied by a brief rationale that explains the item and what it is intended to show or demonstrate. These may be the same documents and rationales submitted as artifacts as part of the evaluation process. BPS makes some suggestions for entries to include:

• A unit or lesson plan the teacher has developed and if possible, the plan should reflect the grade level and content area of the position being sought.
• Assessment data that demonstrates student performance and an analysis of the results. Examples of student work, and an accompanying description of the child(ren) as learner(s) and as individual(s).
• Sample lessons or assignments designed to meet the needs of various learners (ELL, SPED, etc.), differentiated in instruction. Some schools may request the candidate to demonstrate a sample lesson. They state the sample lesson should include the grade level, content area, approximate number of students present in said sample lesson. In the sample lesson, they suggest the candidate chooses an appropriate objective for the grade level, content area, and time frame. They look for the candidate to prepare a manageable lesson of approximately 30 minutes that will lead students to the mastery of the objective. BPS has stated that the observers will be looking for: Competency 2: Subject Matter Expertise; Competency 3: Adjustment to Practice; Competency 4: Student Engagement.

What’s the “Paraprofessional First Consideration” Process for Teaching Vacancies?

The contract language reads: “A paraprofessional who has received his/her teaching certification, are recommended for employment by his/her building administrat...”

Who Are the People Coming Into My Classroom?

Our contract language states that, “All visitors to a classroom shall knock on the door and, if invited to do so, will intro...”
Moving to Action: Empowering Our Members to Make a Change

By Jessica Tang,
BTU Director of Organizing

How do we move our members from fear to courage? From resigned to activated? From being overwhelmed to empowered?

On Saturday, February 28th, almost fifty BTU Building Reps and other BTU members gathered together to begin answering those questions.

In the morning, our members were joined by representatives from the Boston Education Justice Alliance who shared how parents, students, community members and teachers have come together to create a stakeholder-driven coalition that is currently working on a campaign for equitable school funding and creating “The Schools Our Communities Deserve.”

Afterwards, members participated in workshops to learn from colleagues and BPS parents about how existing school structures, such as Faculty Senates, School Site Councils, and Parent Councils can be revitalized to empower members to create positive school change within their schools and beyond.

The end of the day was wrapped up by Brant Duncan, President of the Lynn Teachers Union, who shared how a First Books registration drive enabled their local to give away over 43,000 free books to the larger community.

We thank all who were able to give up their Saturday morning to attend, and to all who helped to plan it and make it happen! Participants had the following remarks about the new event: “Great day! I loved it,” “I needed information/inspiration! Thanks,” and “This was a great opportunity to touch base and interact with other BTU members, thanks!” We hope to have more such events in the future. We thank all who were able to give up their Saturday morning to attend, and to all who helped to plan it and make it happen!
On Thursday, February 19th, BTU members joined over 1,200 young people from around the state to support the Youth Jobs Coalition’s annual action. Each year the students come together during February vacation to rally, march, and participate in legislative visits. The coalition drew students and allies from over 12 different cities, and the BTU was a proud supporter of our many students who were there as well.

– Jessica Tang, BTU Director of Organizing

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180 Dayz

www.180dayz.com

By Scott Hubeny

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January

June
BTU Holds East Boston Meet and Greet

Each month, the BTU has been holding "Regional Meet and Greets" for our members. On March 5th, members stopped by Kelley Square Pub to share their ideas, ask questions, meet other educators working in or living in the East Boston area. The Meet and Greets are a way for our members to learn about what’s happening in the BTU and get answers to questions they may have face to face with staff members, without having to travel to the BTU office. The events are both fun and informative, and this month we had a raffle for Red Sox Tickets, an Amazon gift card, and new BTU fleece! Congratulations to our winners: Maureen Spavento, Joshua Stasios, Melanie Kerr, respectively.

– Jessica Tang, BTU Director of Organizing

Photos by
Jessica Tang
A n imposing pale stone fortress, Brighton High School sits high on a hill behind St. Elizabeth Hospital. Serving over a thousand students, it still manages to create a “small school” atmosphere in classes where teachers pay attention to individual needs. Many of the students are immigrants and in need of intensive ESL instruction; I talked with young people who were born in Brazil, Sudan, and Hong Kong—one young man had only been here for six months!

Principal Patrick Tutwiler welcomed me, giving me keys to the elevator and to rooms that might be locked so that I didn’t need to interrupt instruction. That was a first for me! Students everywhere were reading, writing, taking a diagnostic test, solving math problems with graphing calculators, or watching an educational video. History teacher Matthew Clark was talking with his ninth grade students about the reasons for and results of the War of 1812, asking them to think about and write predictions of how the Americans might’ve responded to the burning of Washington, D.C. Students were preparing posters for their science fair projects in Katrina Stieren’s science class. Art teacher Chris Plunkett moved around the room helping students design realistic or fantasy cityscapes. In Patricia Kelliber’s Graphic Design & Photography class a group of students was setting up a photo shoot, while others worked at computers and another got tips from her teacher about how to use a digital camera. Students’ projects involved showing how the Bill of Rights connected to their personal experience and it was good to see an interdisciplinary assignment at the high school level.

A sign on one math teacher’s door caught my eye, boldly proclaiming that students who enter her classroom are mathematicians and explorers…and their teachers care about them. I also really liked the bulletin board in Rohin Mankel’s SEJ math classroom, which invited students to “Change your language, change your mindset!” with language such as: “This is too hard!” “This may take some time and effort.” “And it’s good enough.” “Is this really my best work?”

When asked what he liked best about his school, Biology teacher Garret Virchick said: “The staff in all departments work together. There is an understanding that the challenges we face demand teamwork. One thing we do before each whole school meeting is take a few moments where people get up and acknowledge the help they’ve received recently from different teachers.” Now that’s a good idea! Please share what’s working in your school—invite me to visit!

Amika Kemmler Ernst, Ed. D.
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(Amika Kemmler Ernst is a recently retired BPS New Teacher Developer with extensive experience as a classroom teacher, curriculum developer, and graphic artist. Her “We’re Learning Here” Project features images of everyday learning in our public schools, along with the words of the students pictured.)

We were working on a problem in our Senior Math Seminar, an alternative to AP Calculus. This year we’ve learned how to figure out percentages, how to analyze scatter plots, and how to graph equations to find rates of change.

Ernst Dominique, Gideon Jeanty, & Lory Cadreau, Grade 12

I was in photography class and Ms. Kelliber was showing me how to operate the digital camera. We are working on a project to illustrate an article of the Bill of Rights. This year I’ve learned how to create a PowerPoint slide show and to use Photoshop. I have a 1980s Polaroid camera and I’ve learned that I am an analog girl in a digital world!

Allana Hall, Grade 12

I was showing William (Ng) how to read the music and play the notes on the keyboard in Fundamental Music class, where we have piano one week and chorus the next. This year I’m learning the names for each note and how to sing better, like how to hold a high note for a longer period of time. I also play guitar and I’m the vocalist in a band with five other musicians.

Kailey Zhu, Grade 12

I was working on a 2-point perspective project. Mr. Plunkett was teaching me how to keep the paper in place by taping the edges in a 90° angle with the table. We’ve also done still-life drawings and symmetrical designs. I really like how Mr. Plunkett comes around to give us ideas and I’ve learned that everybody has the ability to be an artist if they put their mind to it.

Krystal Green, Grade 11

I was studying for a quiz in my AP Government class. We are learning about Congress and how it works. We’ve learned the differences between the House and the Senate—for example, there are fewer members in the Senate, so they have more time to debate bills. We’ve also learned about the responsibilities of the Speaker of the House and other legislative leaders.

Steffanie Cook, Grade 12

We were working on graphing linear equations in math class. We have also learned how to factor binomial and trinomial equations. Those are equations with two or three unknowns. The most important thing we’ve learned is to take our time and follow every step when solving math problems.

Jasmine Arias & Kim Gonzalez-Moreta, Grade 11

I am in English class with Mrs. Silva. We were reading paragraphs and answering questions about them. In this class we do a lot of reading and writing. I have learned to read more quickly and easily. I am also learning English grammar, like how to use different forms and tenses of verbs correctly.

Omar Abdurezaim, Grade 9