

EDUCATION: THE “BUSINESS” OF AMERICA

Nuwar Ahmed

Schools are institutions created to teach and socialize students in an environment they feel comfortable in, so what do we do when a school becomes a business? In Washington, D.C., New York City, and Chicago, mass school closures were said to be the only beneficial strategy for improving the educational systems within these specific cities. Data shows that these 3 major cities have not benefited and in fact have suffered from these reforms. Unfortunately, this reform is beginning in Philadelphia and the outcome will probably be the same. Now my question is, if it didn't work in 3 other major cities, what makes those in power think it will work here?

Nationwide, school districts claim to close schools for reasons of cost effectiveness and because schools are “failing”. I personally believe it's just not that simple. I don't think these two major reasons should be the basis of school closures especially since schools are so crucial in expanding our society and should be treated as such. In Chicago, the school district announced that by closing schools, they would save between \$140 million and \$675 million over 10 years. Later, however it was shown that they would have to give roughly \$155 million to \$450 million to what they called “upfront cash investment” to slow the chaos that comes from school closures. Pittsburgh closed 22 schools in 2006 and Washington, D.C., closed 23 schools in 2008. However, the money saved was all short-term, between \$14.7 and \$16.7 million for each city. For Chicago and New York, school districts that wanted to close 100 to 140 schools each from 2002 to 2012, statistics show that the estimated savings would be between \$500,000 and \$800,000. After treating schools like a business, contending that by closing schools down, more money would sprout, we must ask how much the school district of Philadelphia will really make? Will it truly benefit us?

Besides cost effectiveness, standardized testing is another reason why school closures have been so massive throughout the country. It's easy to set goals for all schools with testing scores but it just makes schools even more like a business. Instead of helping schools that are not performing as well as the state representatives and city councils would like (based on mandated tests), School Districts just close the schools down. Instead of looking at funding inequity, poverty, personal issues of individual students, and the very obvious issue that a test on reading, writing, and math skills does not describe a person fully, those in charge find it easier to claim a school “failing,” making it much easier to close many schools.

We are all individual students. But school districts look at us like numbers and treat us like we aren't going to grow up to replace those who are in power now. The state took \$1 billion from Pennsylvania education to put into the funding for prisons with this idea that it's best to build more prisons since more young people are going to drop out and go to prison anyway. It makes more sense to put more money into education and support the students. If anything, by showing more support, students are more likely to want to do better in school and the drop out rate will decrease, just from pure support from their schools. Personally, I think it's beneficial for there to be more faith in the students because nothing good comes from setting us up for failure primarily for schools in Black and Brown neighborhoods.

Although these major cities have closed many of their schools, students, parents, and education-supporting organizations are fighting back. In Chicago on March 12, 2013, many students boycotted a required standardized test in protest against the 54 school closures that was being planned for the year. The walkout and protest was planned by two major organizations of students: Voice of Youth and Chicago Students Organizing to Save our Schools. In Washington, D.C., parents and students gathered for a moratorium on the mass school closures throughout the country on February 01, 2013. In Philadelphia, Youth United for Change and the Philadelphia Student Union successfully planned a walkout on Friday, May 17, 2013. The walkout began at noon; thousands of students and adult volunteers marched out of their schools to City Hall to chant and protest against deeper budget cuts to education while state representations and Philadelphia city council members were in the city. All these protests, rallies, and walkouts show the importance of education and funding to all the students and the supporters in these major cities; now it's time for those in power to realize the importance.

I believe we, the students, are underrepresented. It's unfortunate that those in power do not give the attention education really needs in order for it to live up to its true potential. Schools are not businesses, where individual students are not represented and are made to be like robots who follow the status quo that comes from these standards placed by the school district. We are not robots, schools are not corporations, and education should not be a system based on moneymaking or standardized test scores.

Nuwar Ahmed is a senior at Julia R. Masterman. She is a proud member of the Philadelphia Student Union, where she

expresses her passion for student rights through writing for their newsletter, creating podcasts for their radio OnBlast, and by attending events created by other students through the country. She loves working in the Philadelphia Student Union and has learned so much about her community, the current education system, and even herself.

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