



Date: January 22, 2010

Topic: The Proposed Phase-out and Eventual Closure of Paul Robeson High School

Date of Panel Vote: January 26, 2010

Summary of Proposal

Beginning in the 2010-2011 school year, Paul Robeson High School (17K625, “Robeson High School”), an existing school serving grades 9-12 in Community School District 17 (“District 17”), will be phased-out of operation. Robeson High School is housed in school building K625 (hereinafter referred to as “K625”), located at 150 Albany Avenue, Brooklyn.

In the 2010-2011, Robeson High School will begin phasing out one grade per year. Robeson will not accept new grade 9 students for the 2010-2011 school year, and grade 9 will be eliminated in 2010-2011. Grade 10 will be eliminated in 2011-2012, and grade 11 will be eliminated in 2012-2013. Robeson High School will close in June 2013.

At this time there is no plan for the use of space made available by the phase-out and closure of Robeson High School.

The Educational Impact Statement on this proposal was posted on the Department of Education’s Web site on December 8, 2009.

Summary of Comments received at the Joint Public Hearing

A joint public hearing regarding this proposal was held at school building K625 on January 7, 2010. The meeting was open to the public, and all interested parties had the opportunity to comment on the proposal. Fifty-nine individuals gave public comment; all were opposed to the proposal. Speakers opposed the proposal for the following reasons: (1) Robeson High School has strong extra-curricular programs that should be preserved; (2) alumni reported that attending Robeson High School was a positive experience for them; (3) Robeson High School provides extensive resources to serve its many high need students; (4) Robeson has good guidance counselors; (5) the school is improving; and (6) the data reported by DOE as reasons for the proposed phase-out is incorrect.

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Summary of Issues Raised in Written and Oral Comments and Significant Alternatives Suggested

One written comment regarding this proposal has been received. The comment expressed opposition to the proposal and stated that the school did not receive sufficient resources, the legacy of Paul Robeson should be honored; and it noted the potential for overcrowding in other schools as a result of the phase-out.

In addition to the above comment, some individuals and one organization, Class Size Matters (“CSM”), submitted written comments objecting to all of the phase-outs proposed by the DOE. Although the comments did not address any one phase-out proposal in particular, but instead addressed all proposals generally, the DOE has incorporated these comments into the public comment analysis for each phase-out proposal, including Robeson. In opposing the DOE’s proposal to phase-out and eventually close these schools, these commenters cited the following reasons: (1) the Educational Impact Statements for the proposals cite incomplete or inaccurate graduation rates and do not state the schools’ five-year graduation rates as used by the New York State Education Department; (2) the DOE did not use a rational formula and failed to follow its own accountability standards in proposing these phase-outs; (3) the schools the DOE has proposed for phase-out have significantly high numbers of minority and high-risk students, including special education students, incoming ninth-grade students with low scores upon admission, and homeless students, who will not be accepted or accommodated at the new small schools that replace the phasing out schools; (4) the Educational Impact Statements do not address where students at the phasing out school who are behind in credits will attend in the future; (5) the Educational Impact Statements fail to analyze the impact of the phase-outs on overcrowding of other schools and use figures from the DOE’s Blue Book, which does not use a formula that is aligned with state-mandated class size goals; (6) closing large, zoned high schools will force many students to travel further from their homes; (7) large high schools provide more choices in electives for students and can address a broader range of students; (8) the Educational Impact Statements do not address the financial impact of the placements of teachers from the phasing-out schools into the Absent Teacher Reserve (ATR) or the expense of funding the new schools; (9) the phasing out schools are being punished for setting high academic and safety standards; (10) the phase-outs will impair recruitment of teachers into schools serving high-needs students; and (11) there is no evidence that the DOE has made an attempt to improve conditions at the schools the DOE has proposed to phase-out.

Finally, CSM calls for a moratorium on school closings until the City’s Independent Budget Office can prepare a report on the effects such closings. As an alternative, CSM suggests that rather than phase-out these schools, the DOE should: (1) implement smaller class sizes at the schools; (2) restore the superintendent role and cooperation between schools; (3) provide more resources and expert help for the schools; (4) develop better curricula for at-risk students; (5) provide more support to large, comprehensive high schools; (6) launch an independent investigation of test score inflation, credit recovery and cheating, and reform the accountability system so as to not encourage these practices; and (7) implement new approaches to discipline.

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Analysis of Issues Raised, Significant Alternatives Proposed and Changes Made to the Proposal

Commenters expressed their belief that Robeson High School is improving; however, despite intensive efforts to transform outcomes at the school including ongoing, targeted, in house professional development and the introduction of Student Learning Communities, student achievement has not improved. In 2007-08, the graduation rate at Robeson was 56 percent. In 2008-09, that rate fell to only 40 percent, while the City's average graduation rate continued to improve. One commenter cited the State Education Department's recent adoption of the five-year graduation rates as a reason for the opposition to the phase-out proposals. This policy, however, was adopted by the Regents in October and therefore does not apply to the previous years' graduation rates. Moreover, if Regents diplomas alone counted toward graduation — as will be the case in just two years — Robeson's graduation rate would be less than 20 percent. Robeson received a C grade on its Progress Reports for three consecutive years; and although Robeson was deemed "Proficient" on its Quality Review, the Review cited several serious concerns that suggested dramatic improvements at the school are unlikely.

As the school's performance has declined, enrollment has followed suit. Four years ago, the school enrolled 1,500 students; today, enrollment hovers around 1,000. In recent years, the DOE closed several nearby failing high schools including Prospect Heights and Erasmus High Schools and replaced those schools with new, smaller schools. As new, smaller schools in those buildings began to grow and demonstrate strong performance, families have opted to send their children to those schools in increasing numbers. The DOE believes that students will be similarly attracted to the Robeson campus when DOE phases the campus into new smaller schools.

While there may be staff members at the school, such as guidance counselors, who are doing their best to serve students and while previous graduates may have had positive experiences at the school, the data shows that Robeson is not serving its students. As the data set forth above shows, the school has failed to show that it has the capacity to turn around.

Commenters also expressed concern over the school's large population of high needs students and the lack of resources provided to serve these students. The school has a fairly small percentage of English language learners (3 percent), but has a relatively large special education population (16 percent). Other nearby schools and new schools started by the current DOE administration serving similar populations have achieved much better results.

Moreover, the comments concerning a lack of sufficient funding for the school's high needs population are unfounded. In addition to the per pupil funding that Robeson High School has received, the school has also received additional resources in the form of a federal grant to create small learning communities. The DOE is committed to working to develop options for students that incorporate community input and includes CTE pathways.

Some commenters have suggested that the DOE has not used a rational formula and has not followed its accountability criteria in deciding which schools should be phased out. Under the DOE's accountability framework, schools that receive an overall grade of D or F on the Progress Report are subject to school improvement measures. If no significant progress is made

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over time, a leadership change (subject to contractual obligations), restructuring, or closure is possible. The same is true for schools receiving a C for three years in a row and for any school that the Chancellor has determined lacks the necessary capacity to improve student performance, regardless of the school's Progress Report grades and Quality Review scores

It is important to understand that the DOE weighs numerous factors when evaluating schools as candidates for closure. Although Progress Report grades and Quality Review scores contribute significantly to the decision-making process, they are not the only considerations. The DOE takes into account many other sources of information as well, including school performance trends, enrollment data, demand data, and evaluations by superintendents and school support staff who work closely with the school and can evaluate its capacity to make significant improvements within a short time span.

The Quality Review evaluates how well schools are organized to improve student learning. It measures educator and administrator actions, which are "inputs." It does not measure results, or "outputs," and though it reflects some factors in school success, those are but one set of factors. If administrator actions improve while student progress does not, we still must try to change the outcome. Schools are rated on a four-point scale, with "Well Developed" representing the top category of performance.

But school turnaround is difficult, takes time, and does not always succeed. A score of "Well Developed" might give us confidence that the school has the capacity to rapidly make significant improvements, while a "Proficient" school may only be capable of making incremental gains insufficient to quickly reverse a longstanding history of failure.

Proficient schools possess strengths and weaknesses. In evaluating the Quality Review reports from schools considered for closure, we looked closely at the reviewer's assessment of those strengths and weaknesses to see how they might impact the school's capacity to achieve a dramatic turnaround. For example, at many of the schools proposed for closure, evaluators found that instruction lacked rigor or was not sufficiently differentiated to meet individual student needs—both very serious concerns.

Many of the schools we proposed for closure received "Proficient" ratings on their Quality Reviews, including Robeson High School, and that is good news for current students who will remain enrolled in the school as it phases out. We expect phase-out schools to continue supporting their students and, in fact, outcomes at phase-out schools have historically improved with each successive year. That said, the Department's comprehensive review of the 19 schools proposed for closure found that none of those schools was equipped to make the dramatic progress needed to quickly transform into truly successful schools where all students can thrive.

Some commenters have asserted that the DOE has targeted schools with high numbers of minority students and at-risk students, including special education students, incoming ninth graders with low test scores, and homeless students. In support of this claim, commenters state that the schools subject to phase-out serve a significantly higher number of at-risk students than schools with similarly low grades that are not slated for closure. They also claim that these students will be displaced as a result of the school phase-outs because the new small replacement

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schools will not accept or accommodate such students. New schools that have been opened by the DOE serve all students.

The new small schools that have been created over the last six years do, in fact, accept ELLs and special education students and are serving them at a higher rate than schools citywide, with better outcomes. On average the new schools have a graduation rate of 75% and are serving some of the hardest to serve students. Here are some facts:

- The vast majority of new schools have unscreened admissions policies.
- During the 2008-2009 school year, ninth-grade enrollment at new schools included 14.2 percent special education students and 13.6 percent ELLs, compared to 12.8 percent special education students and 10.3 percent ELLs citywide.
- When looking across a school's entire population, new schools also serve more special education students and ELL students than the citywide average. In 2008-2009, new schools served an average of 12.3 percent special education students and 12.6 percent ELLs compared with 11.6 percent and 10.8 percent, respectively, citywide.
- Looking at collaborative team teaching and self-contained classes—considered the highest-need special education students—new schools continue to serve a larger population than schools citywide with 8.1 percent of their students requiring those services compared to 7.4 percent citywide in 2008-2009.
- Similarly, new small schools serve a higher proportion of low-income students, black and Hispanic students, and students performing below grade-level expectations upon ninth-grade enrollment when compared against citywide averages.

Seventeen percent of Robeson High School's students are ELLs, and 12 percent are special education students, compared with 14 percent ELLs and 15 percent special education students served by schools on average citywide. The DOE is creating additional options in Brooklyn to replace seat capacity at Robeson High School. These schools will have the capacity to serve high needs students, including special education students, ELLs, and homeless students. With respect to homeless students in particular, the CSM comments suggest that closing schools would take away the only stable environment these students have. The phase-out process, however, is a gradual one and will not displace these students. Further, student outcomes at phase-out schools tend to improve with each successive year as they become smaller and are better able to provide personalized attention to their students.

Current students at the schools proposed for phase-out who are behind in credits, including current Robeson High School students, will not be displaced as a result of the phase-out proposals. The DOE is committed to supporting schools as they phase-out. The DOE will assist phase-out schools in developing individual plans for each student to ensure that they continue to accumulate credits and will be able to graduate before or at the point the school is slated for complete phase-out. Any students who are unable to accumulate the requisite number of credits within the three-year timeline will be placed in other schools or programs that meet their needs and where they will continue to work towards earning a diploma.

The DOE does not anticipate that the phase-out of schools will result in overcrowding at other schools throughout the city. With the phase-out and eventual closure of these schools,

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including Robeson High School, the DOE has also proposed the phase-in of several new small schools. The building in which Robeson High School is housed will not be closed and citywide we will be replacing each seat that is lost. For next year there will be sufficient seats. To the extent CSM asserts that the DOE has not adhered to state-mandated class size goals in planning school phase-outs and new replacement schools, the DOE disagrees. Through a combination of new facilities, the adjustment of enrollment projections and the opening of new schools, we will serve all students who otherwise would have attended a school proposed for closure. The centralized High School Admissions Process allows us to do two things: (1) ensure that students have access to high quality options and (2) ensure that we plan for all schools appropriately.

It is important to be clear that the DOE values choice. Many of the overcrowded schools are zoned schools that offer additional programs for students outside of the zone. We constantly struggle to balance demand for zoned and choice programs in a school. Currently students are not choosing to attend the schools proposed for phase-out and they are not at full capacity. By phasing out these underperforming and low demand schools and putting in new options, we will draw students back to the campus and ultimately reduce overcrowding in other areas.

Commenters have further stated that closing large, zoned high schools will force many students to travel further from their homes. The High School Application Process allows students to rank up to 12 high school choices. Given the over 400 high school options available to students, they will only have to travel further from their homes if there is a high school option that they wish to attend. Additionally, some commenters have stated that large high schools provide more choices in electives for students and can address a broader range of students than the small schools that will replace them. Small schools currently offer AP and College Now Courses in addition to other electives depending on the particular school and student demand. Schools on a campus can also collaborate to offer electives to students across the various schools on the campus.

Some commenters also state that schools are being punished for setting high academic and safety standards. The DOE is not using phase-out proposals to punish schools. The schools proposed for phase-out have not exhibited evidence of helping students to achieve high standards. In fact, the schools proposed for phase-out have a long history of underperformance.

In opposing all of the DOE's phase-out proposals, one commenter argues that no school should be phased out and closed due to the potentially impaired recruitment of teachers into schools serving high needs students, the costs associated with starting new replacement schools, and the expense of placing teachers in the absent teacher reserve pool. There is, however, no evidence that school closures cause teachers to avoid working at schools that serve high needs students. In fact, over the last seven years, the DOE has raised teacher preparation to a point where 100 percent of teachers are certified, as compared to a low of 83 percent before, with the gap existing in high-poverty schools. Second, while there are costs associated with the opening of new schools and with teachers put into excess, the greater cost is that of the thousands of students who have passed through the schools proposed for closure without graduating or developing proficiency. Cost can only be considered in the context of what is earned in return. In these cases, too few students have earned the education we owe them, and the costs are born by not just the DOE, but those children, their families, and society at-large.

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Finally, members of the public commenting on this proposal have assert that there is no evidence that the DOE attempted to improve the conditions at any of the schools it has proposed to close and suggests steps the DOE should take to improve these schools. Robeson High School has worked closely with a School Support Organization (“SSO”) and network team selected by the principal and School Leadership Team. The SSO works with the principal and other school staff members to provide support on a broad set of issues, including curriculum and instruction, human resources, professional development, budgets, and legal issues, among others. These SSOs work closely with the schools to ensure that inquiry teams are working at each school and using data to drive instruction. Network Leaders and Achievement Coaches spend time on a weekly basis in the schools. In addition the Superintendents and School Achievement Facilitators also provide support to schools and Principals. All City schools benefit from these supports and most City schools have made steady progress under this Administration. Extensive supports were provided by Robeson High School’s SSO, including professional development and mentoring to teachers and administrators. In addition, the DOE’s Office of Postsecondary Pathways and Panning worked with the SSO to support Robeson High School’s Small Learning Communities initiative.

Because there is little evidence to suggest that continued school improvement measures will result in improved outcomes for students, the DOE has chosen not to accept the alternatives proposed. The proposal will be presented to the Panel for Educational Policy as it is currently posted.

A copy of the educational impact statement for this proposal can be obtained at http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/ronlyres/F0043783-8608-433C-855E-99228622A268/73549/17K625Robeson_EIS6.pdf.

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