

Chicago Board of Education meeting faces militant protests against school closings

By Lotty Blumenthal

Hundreds of parents, teachers, students and politicians opposing proposed school closings packed the February 22 meeting of the Chicago Board of Education, but most were relegated to a “holding room” on the 19th floor of the Board’s downtown headquarters while the meeting proceeded on the fifth floor. While seats on the fifth floor were filled with Board staff and a group of visiting social worker interns. Parents and others who wished to speak were often too late to get into the meeting after being shuttled from the 19th floor.

But before any of the major concerns voiced by the public could be aired, the Board had ceremonial business. Before the public participation, teacher and coach Dorothy Gaitors of Marshall High School was honored as the winningest basketball coach — not only of Chicago, but in the history of the State of Illinois and the nation. She has not only won more games as the coach of the “Lady Commandos” basketball team than any other coach, she has also been a superior classroom teacher and administrator. In honoring Coach Gaitors (a Marshall alumna), the Board also noted that she sent almost all her players on to college. Gaitors is so dedicated to Marshall that her grandson is enrolled at Marshall and is a young member of the boys team. She is the best representative of a school with a great tradition of a dedicated staff in all areas.

The Board then honored Morgan Park High School for having the greatest number of African American students pass Advance Placement exams and Haines Elem, Spry Community Academy, Williams Elementary, Excel Academy, North Side Prep, and other schools for high monthly attendance. Public participation finally began at 11:20 a.m.

Rev. Jenks began with a prayer for the session, asking for blessings on the meeting for those of power — “Even brother Arne Duncan.”

First Joyce Willis and Darren Henry of Smyth School thanked CPS for their administration and positive changes at the school, including a partnership with Lake Side Bank and a computer lab. Having been on Probation for ten years, the school was not closed, leadership was changed, attendance is now at 93-plus percent, and scores are up. They expect to be off probation this year.

Next Clifford Fields and Paul Collins asked for stability in administration at Harper High School. Harper has been given attention and help by Jesse Jackson Sr., Bobby Rush and others. The speakers noted that Rush gave them two truant officers, something needed in most CPS high schools. Board attorney Patrick Rocks told them they have to get off probation before the LSC could select a principal on its own. Collins told him there were precedents for exceptions. Board President Michael Scott said he’d look into whatever flexibility there was for the situation.

Next Brigitte Smith and Joyce Nicosia of LEARN charter school told how happy they were and for renewal of Learn Charter.

Next a group from Collins High School came to speak about the anticipated closure of Collins High School. John Dudley and Lillie R. St. Clair were designated speakers. Dudley, a social studies teacher at Collins, talked about external partners who had evaluated the school, and that the current staff had the knowledge to go forward with plans to recreate the school within a seven-month time frame. Scott responded that he was not concerned with expediency, but going through a process. Dudley spoke of the sad and harmful effect of “phasing out” (closing) a school on students and staff. Scott said he only wanted it done correctly. Dudley responded that the current staff could do whatever was needed and faster.

Ms St Clair a reading specialist at the school asked that the school work with Barbara Eason-Watkins, the only person in top administration with any extensive education background. She asked for additional resources to work with incoming freshmen over the summer and after school. Schools that are closed seldom get additional resources. In addition, if after a year, students wish to return, they will not have had specialized treatment to enable them to succeed. She closed by saying that students are more than test scores. She asked, “What more important, a life or a test score?”

Apparently, as the teachers noted, a test score. The Board of Education chose to eliminate freshmen for 2006 after returning from executive session later in the day.

Next Alderman Michael Chandler was given time at which he requested the first Collins Principal retiree Grady Jordan spoke. Jordan said that as he passed the school that morning he felt he” was going to his own funeral” after the struggle to create and open the school. He said that he investigated all schools on the West side from Ashland Ave. to Austin Blvd. and from North Ave. to 26th St and except for schools with special enrollment, none of them are much above 20 percent on test scores. He called it “transferring them from one leaky boat to another” and said it didn’t make any sense educationally. He pointed out that since 1999, the Board has controlled the school, changing leaders so often one couldn’t keep track, most of them with no high school experience. (Down town bureaucrats do not seem to know that elem. and secondary ed is different). Jordan likened the idea of not getting a stable administration until getting off probation to saying that the Cubs couldn’t get a manager until they won a pennant. He said this concept makes no sense anywhere outside this CPS building. He named those responsible for Collins creation — including George Collins for whom the school was named — as rolling over in their graves at Collins’ closing.

Then Alderman Michael Chandler spoke. He said that he was against the closing of Collins for the same reasons given by Dr. Jordan. He said that there was a town meeting — which neither Duncan nor Scott attended — at which his constituents felt that the real estate carpetbaggers were instigating the closing of the schools and wrecking havoc on neighborhoods in order to develop them. He complained about Frazier Elementary School (also being closed) because the CPS report that the scores had gone down were wrong. They had gone up for three years in a row. Later we’d learn it had only been on probation one year when Duncan, the man with no education background, changed the criteria for closing schools with no explanation of the validity of changing the criteria. Look back at the first speakers from Smyth (on probation for 10 years and never closed), some said. It looks like someone was targeting Frazier.

Chandler has placed a resolution in the City Council to stop school closings until a follow up-study shows how students who have been moved from school to school have progressed. He said he requested it before and has not received it.

Next Clarice Berry of the Chicago Principals Association talked of the lack of respect for Principals by the CPS Board who has not given them the same raise as teachers. Scott said he’d meet with her the next Friday.

Next Chicago Teachers Union President Marilyn Stewart spoke extemporaneously. She mentioned that the business and real estate community seems to be running Renaissance 2010 rather than the educational community. She read the definition of gentrification and said it fit what CPS is trying to do. She said, “Students have a moral right to stability.”

She said the Board and administration are “ignoring” the social issues which students must deal with in getting an education. She mentioned that schools like Morgan Park that have programs that work have be replicated. She said that changing students-at-risk to schools that are not better academically is not fulfilling NCLB. She said the Board’s actions did not make sense. (Not educational sense, but perhaps real estate sense). She said the plans of parents and staff should be followed. She said, “You are not putting children first!” She said, “There are plenty of schools that are working,” and have been working without Ren 20 10. She said we need to replicate what’s right and much is right. Scott said he respected her educational strategies but really understood gentrification. Scott noted that people are selling their homes in record numbers and moving to the suburbs as they have all their lives because they believe there are no good schools to send their children to. Some noted that Scott’s version is mistaken. It is more likely today that wealthier people who can afford gated secure communities (see houses on Arthington) are replacing those who can’t in order to avoid the increased violence both in and out of schools. Others have noted that the violence has been increased by Scott’s policies so that real estate vultures will profit. A major article about violence appeared in the Sun-Times on Sunday March 12.

After a dialogue confrontation, Stewart said, “Listen to the educators and stop shoving things down our throat!” She said they must listen to those being negatively impacted. She also said that originally Collins was supposed to be in the “Fresh Start Program” where the CTU works with schools at risk. Then CPS removed Collins from the program last summer after it had sent failing students from other failing schools there. It seems that Collins was a target. Scott admitted he had no answer for that. Someone should investigate.

Next Natha L. Davie spoke of the Sherman School, which was scheduled to be “reconstituted”. She asked that as a reading teacher that current staff changes made a school that was working toward raised scores and just needed one more year to succeed.

Maritza Ortiz told how happy she was with the safe environment of her charter school and was going to Springfield for more funds.

Diane Spence spoke for Senator Ricky Hendon accompanied by parents from the to-be-closed Morse School. She said there’d been a hearing in the Senator’s office (including Congressman Danny Davis) and that the school — along with Collins and Frazier — was not going to be closed. Apparently, CPS Board members were not listening, as usual, because at the end of this meeting they voted to close the schools. Because of the large number of people who turned out for the meeting, hundreds were on the 19th floor, while the meeting was being held on the fifth floor. Parents upstairs could not be brought down in time to speak.

Jessica Rogers, Morse School staff did speak saying that the statistics Scott presented as going backward for students were invalid since the school has a 49% mobility rate. Therefore, the test scores were from different students from grade to grade. The parents and teachers noted that no one at CPS understands what that means and don’t care whether their stats are correct or not. They just have some agenda that most, like Marilyn Stewart, think “doesn’t make sense” to those not dealing in real estate. Remember Doolittle West. The numbers were wrong, but they closed it anyway.

Next Tarita Hawkins of Beethoven, a parent representing all members of the school, talked of the threat of the school closing in 2006-7 because of a newspaper article. She was told by Scott and Duncan that there’s no plans to close Beethoven, and it’s not on any list to close. Hawkins then said there’s a list that Farren will be merged into Beethoven. She said Farren already had students from other closed schools with low test scores that brought it down. Now, after working hard to get off probation, the Farren merger would ultimately cause them to close. She said “The children were tossed around as cattle.” She wanted research done of the effects of this forced mobility upon the children. Last month, Alderman Chandler asked for the same thing. Scott assured her that Beethoven would not close and resources would follow the Farren students. When she asked about increased security, Rev. Jenks interjected that two schools — Mollison and Fuller — had not received enough support in a timely fashion when they had received students from schools that were closed two years ago. Scott never answered about security or the needed research. Most observers noted that usually CPS research is suspect. For instance, a spokesman in the Sunday Sun-Times article about violence said all the increased violence was from better reporting.

Next the Principal of the closing Sherman School, James E. Smith told of the accomplishments of the school which were numerous with numerous activities and grants including a raise in test scores every year from about 18 in 2001 to at least 29 in 2005. There were even more raises with a reading specialist whose job was cut. Scott thanked him for coming.

Next Samantha Stinson represented State Rep. Annazette Collins who sent her to say she was in favor of closing Collins High which is not in her district, but has students who are. She would like to have been notified first before the news was made public.

Next the Principal of the closing Frazier was called upon. [She did not say her name]. She told of inconsistent statistics. Frazier had never been on probation until Arne Duncan changed the criteria for being on probation in 2003 with no educational evidence for changing the criteria except Duncan's whim. And each year since then, she said, Frazier's scores had gone up. She pointed out that there were schools who have been on probation for years and are not being shut; in fact, one of the schools to which Frazier's children are being sent has been on probation and had lower scores than Frazier and has only 200 plus students (not being utilized) while Frazier has 506 students. (The perfect small school size according to Duncan's criteria).

She said that this closing was unfair. She said that this was "Wrong for my children, wrong for my teachers, wrong for the parents." Scott said it was being made on the recommendation of his "Staff."

Rev. Jenks stood by her side as she left with the words: "It's the worse thing that ever happened!" Scott asked for the statistics to "see if they matched the staff's." The board voted to close it that day without waiting for more information.

Carmen Lopez (of Belmont-Cragin Childhood Demonstration Center) asked CPS to sign the lease with the Orthodox Church for their center for the next six years. Sean Murphy said it was being done and would be on the March Board agenda.

Tom Ramos of the NCLB parent group at Curie High School appeared again and said the LSC and Principal did not sign off of the distribution of funds for them yet or again. James Deanes, then Attorney Rocks, said that Ramos had caused the delay by making a complaint to the Federal Government and now CPS must await the outcome of a difference in interpretation of the law between the Federal and State governments.

Next, the Frazier parents who had been in the "overflow rooms" were now downstairs. Scott said only one parent could speak since there had been three speakers.

Patrice Whitcher — who had one child in the school, three who graduated from there, and 12 nieces and nephews — spoke about the students being marred socially by the inference of having low test scores as the cause of the school closing. Scott said Frazier was only being shut for one year until the community and the parents told him how to improve it. He did not say why Frazier was not being given the "Smyth Treatment" of being changed while open.

Leo S. McCord talked about how good it is to close a school because when Lucy Flower closed, a wonderful TAC was formed, and worked with the community creating the Al Raby High School for Community and Environment. He said that it all turned out as well. McCord who has no educational background and no proof of the effect of the closing, only had his opinion based on the new school being good. He also did not notice that Lucy Flower was not a regular neighborhood school, but one with a city-wide attendance area unlike all these closure.

Marvin McNeil a parent from Harlan asked: "Why did you mess with our school?"

McNeil said that they had a good academic program starting with seventh grade and some minor problems, like overcrowding and poor physical plant. Then Duncan and Scott sent them 350 students from closing schools, especially Calumet High School. McNeil, of the LSC said: "I guess we're the holding pen" for these schools. Now Harlan had a serious problem. Duncan and Scott transferred "An entire different gang" into the school. Violence increased drastically, just like last year at Wells. He said, "They were underachievers academically and socially." He also noted that none of the promised resources reached the school before the students. He said there were not enough teachers to cover classes.

Scott said he was at the school after "the shooting," and the principal said she didn't have enough staff and had a program problem resulting from it — and didn't mention security. Didn't Mr. Scott think a shooting was a clue there was a need? Mr. McNeil said that after receiving the "deluge" of outside students, his son who had perfect attendance was now cutting first and last period classes in order to avoid the gangs, ruining his attendance. There were 35 to 50 arrests inside the building (not counting those outside) and over 200 suspensions and disciplinary actions this last semester alone. Scott started babbling about the physical plant, that he'd promised some things, that to this date were not done, that he'd called the principal, tried to blame the building on the maintenance people, to which McNeil replied, "That's so not true!"

When asking about security, Scott did not answer. He said he'd see what he had promised would get to Harlan. He never answered the question about why he "messed" with Harlan. This reporter believes the Board, Duncan, and Scott are trying to promote panic peddling by spreading crime to neighborhoods where "flipping" properties may bring profit to the real estate vultures in this city. According to the Sunday, March 12 Sun-Times article, eight schools — including Harlan — are having this problem. Transcripts of hearings on the closing of the schools can show that people said this result would happen. Previous Board hearings had people say this result would occur. Scott and Duncan transferred large numbers anyway, 2 years in a row, then said they did not know this would happen. They ignored the 1st year violence.

Maribel Arellano of Carson School's Student Council spoke about the need of physical plant problems being resolved. Scott had her meet with Sean Murphy to find out where the school was on the list for repairs to the building. Patricia Martinez of Carson then, in translated Spanish, asked that the all-day kindergarten not be cut to half-day. Scott asked her to write to Eason-Watkins about the problem.

Finally Levette Haynes of the Westside Cultural Arts Council talked about the impact of school closings, and that the manner in which it is done could be improved. Currently, the State Legislature has a bill, which will do that. Everyone should contact their State Senator and Representative and tell them to vote for that bill that among other things requires a referendum before a school can be closed. Another bill requires Morgan Park and Bogan be decreased in size. Some said: ask your Representative to add your school to the bill. Scott ended with the unrealistic talk of one who came from a middle class home and went to a middle class school, saying it is up to the community and parents to enact the changes. He does understand what it means if almost one-third of students in some schools in CPS are being raised by grandparents as legal guardians. Only one school has adapted to having a program for this.

Another pro Ren 20 10 person, (Curlee Reed, who happens to be on a TAC and also the Garfield Training Opportunity Program /G-Top (which if it is being paid for and he's on a TAC is a conflict of interest) spoke about the wonderful outcomes that result from closing a school and reopening it (he did not say with his program). He did not mention the effect on the receiving schools.

Linda Randolph, Principal of Carver Primary, talked about a falling, leaky roof, and cuts in staff. With four buildings, only one clerk, the reading specialist and half-time counselor. Scott said to put all concerns to Eason-Watkins and each would be replied to in writing. Murphy said the roof was on his way.

After the closed meeting, criteria for school closings were read and a list of new school openings. When Scott questioned the statistics for Frazier, Duncan simply read the same statistics his staff had previously prepared. There was no investigation to see if those statistics were in error. The Board voted to close Farren, Frazier, and Morse elementary schools and to close ninth grade at Collins High School. It also voted to put Sherman elementary school into reconstitution. Other school closings that had not been discussed in public participation were also approved