

## City Council and School Closings

In less than a month – March 7 – the Philadelphia School Reform Commission is scheduled to vote on new Superintendent William Hite’s plan to shutter 37 (about one in six) public schools.

Some hail the closings as a bold and much-needed move to deal with 53,000 empty seats and reduce the \$1.1 billion, five-year deficit. Others say the proposal is moving too quickly, without enough discussion about where the displaced students will go. Philadelphia City Council will hear from both sides today at 11 a.m. in City Hall, Room 400.

But the city schools are controlled by the state. Does City Council have a role in the closings? This edition of **HOW PHILLY WORKS** gives you the ins and outs of this explosive issue.

-- February 12, 2013

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### **I have something to say on closing schools. Can I talk in Council today?**

Yes, you can sign up when you get to Room 400. If you can’t make it, you can also see the public hearing online by clicking [here](#) or watch on Channel 64, the city’s Government Access Channel (they will also show replays during primetime).

### **Can anyone talk in Council – even people without kids in the school?**

Yes, anyone can talk. The fate of the public schools touches everyone who cares about the city’s future. And the numbers are disturbing. Only about 50% of public school students from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade through 11<sup>th</sup> grade score above proficient in math and reading. On average, only 57% graduate from high school within four years.

### **What power does City Council have to influence schools?**

Council can hold public hearings on the schools, like the one taking place today before its Education Committee. Council also makes important decisions about taxpayer dollars that flow to the public schools. By law, Council is not permitted to reduce the property tax revenue the schools get (from the prior year), but its 17 members can decide whether or not to give the School District additional revenue.

### **Can Council force the School Reform Commission not to close schools?**

No. Council has already passed a resolution for a one-year moratorium on school closings. But the resolution is *non-binding*, which means it has no effect on whether the schools stay open or close.

### **Remind me, how many schools will be affected?**

If the entire plan is approved, 37 schools would close entirely: 22 elementary schools, 4 middle schools and 11 high schools. The plan also calls for relocating seven schools and changing the grade configurations in 23 others. You can see a map of the proposed changes [here](#).

### **How much money will closing schools save?**

About \$28 million annually, according to Dr. Hite, assuming all 37 are closed. (Mayor Nutter – who supports the closings but plays no role in making the final decision – has expressed confidence in this number.) But it's not all about numbers. Hite says the School District is hemorrhaging money from deteriorating schools that still need to be maintained despite low enrollments.

### **The School District could really use that money.**

True, but some question the actual savings. A study released yesterday by The Pew Charitable Trusts reported that sale prices for closed schools in other cities tend to be lower than initial estimates. Six schools already closed by the Philadelphia School District, including one in 2002, are still on the market. On the other hand, 10 schools closed since 2005 have been sold. Three are now being used by charter schools and four are housing developments. The Pew report is available [here](#).

### **What are teachers saying about the school closings plan?**

The head of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, Jerry Jordan, says closing schools will lead to transportation and safety issues. A recent *Philadelphia Public School Notebook* story, which you can read [here](#), also said that \$22.5 million of the \$28 million annual savings would come from eliminating jobs. With the PFT's contract set to expire in August 2013, this could set the stage for ugly contract negotiations.

### **Will closing schools help students do better? That's what matters the most, right?**

Again, there is a debate about how school closings will impact student performance. Dr. Hite says savings from closings will be used to invest in schools that do better in educating students.

### **Do the critics of closings buy this?**

Not at the moment because they say they don't know enough details. They fear that students will be transferred to schools that perform no better or even worse than their current schools. Another anti-closings argument is that minority students will be disproportionately impacted.

### **Who makes the final call on closing schools?**

The Philadelphia School Reform Commission, or SRC, we mentioned earlier. This is a five-member Commission that was created in 2001 to put the then-financially distressed city public schools under state control. Three of the SRC's members are appointed by the Governor and two by Philadelphia's Mayor.

### **Wait, the state runs the city schools?**

That's right. And some say it's time to return to local control. But that's a complicated issue we'll save for a future **HOW PHILLY WORKS**.

### **Back to today's hearing. If Council has no say in the school closings, why hold a hearing?**

Council members want to let the people who put them in office – many of whom have kids in the public schools or work in the schools – know that they understand their distress. This way, they can fight for their constituents without actually having to make the tough decisions.

### **Are all Council members against the closing?**

The only two who voted against the one-year moratorium were Councilman Bill Green and Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sanchez. Green, who has made no secret of his plan to run for mayor in 2015, has argued that the financial realities of the district require school closings. Quiñones-Sanchez hasn't endorsed Hite's plan, but said during a hearing on the moratorium: "We cannot tell the district to right-size itself and at the same time not give it money and at the same time interfere in every decision."

### **Is any other elected official talking about the school closings?**

City Controller Alan Butkovitz (who just announced he is running for reelection this year) called for an independent evaluation of the school closings plan after questioning the financial benefits and raising academic and safety issues.

### **Will all 37 schools actually close?**

Interesting you should ask. According to a story in this morning's *Inquirer*, Dr. Hite now says there will be some changes in his plan. He says he has better recommendations after listening to the public and considering alternative proposals. He didn't give any specifics though.

### **If some schools close, can the School District forget about getting any more money from Council during the budget hearings?**

We're still a few months away from the hearings. Lots can happen in the meantime. Let's wait and see.

*We will continue to keep you posted on the status of the school closings debate. If you want to share anything with us, please e-mail [futureofthecity@seventy.org](mailto:futureofthecity@seventy.org).*