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Parents, teachers, students rally to save Mission Hill elementary school

Posted by Matt Rocheleau December 8, 2010 11:33 AM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

School supporters make their way out of Farragut Elementary to rally along Huntington Avenue.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Parents, students, teachers and school staff rallied outside the David G. Farragut elementary school Tuesday evening to show support for the Mission Hill school's future, which – along with seven other schools slated for closure – will be decided by school committee officials next week.

In frigid weather, the crowd of school supporters waved "Save the Farragut School" signs and chanted the same along Huntington Avenue as cars, pedestrians and MBTA trains passed by before the rallying group moved inside the school for a meeting with city school officials.

Many of members of the passionate crowd said they plan to rally again tonight, joining the large crowd expected at a [school committee hearing](#) at the English High School.

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

A rally outside the school.

An aide to District 8 Councilor Michael P. Ross read a letter from the city council president requesting that Boston Public schools allow parents and students more time to review the proposed city-wide school system changes unveiled last week before officials vote on whether to accept or reject the plans that include school closures and mergers.

“Other schools that face closure were give more notice,” said the letter from Ross, referring to four schools announced in early October as being up for closure. “Less than two weeks notice is not adequate time.”

Farragut was not among the schools announced for closure in October. The school, like three others in Boston, only learned of its potential closure last Thursday when the new, broader proposal of closures, mergers, expansions and other changes was released by city Superintendent Carol R. Johnson.

The city’s argument for closing the Farragut “makes no sense,” said Maralene Zwarich who began teaching third grade at the school this year.

She and fellow teacher Craig Este said the school has had strong academic performance this past year. They said the Farragut is one of 18 schools in Boston that met its adequate yearly progress expectations. The school has built important partnerships with nearby educational institutions and its location is prime for its students -- 41 percent of the school’s students walk to school, the two teachers said.

“What’s going to be left in Mission Hill is you’re going to go to a charter school or you’ll have to be bussed out to another neighborhood,” said Este, who has been teaching in the city school system for 12 years and began as a special education teacher at the Farragut this year.



(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

A rally outside the school.

However, Joseph Shea, an academic superintendent of city elementary schools, said while the school made a significant improvement last year from the year prior, historically the school has been inconsistent over the past five years, including poor performance in 2006, 2007 and 2009.

So while the school scored well on its latest adequate yearly progress report, the Farragut’s composite performing index figure is “still below the district average for elementary schools,” he said.

“The history is basically inconsistent across the board,” said Shea, later adding that “only four percent of parents [in the North Zone] chose Farragut as their first choice school.”

Closing the Farragut is projected to save about \$1 million annually from fiscal year 2012 to 2015, according to city school officials.

Este said he believes the city school department wants to close the school so it can sell the valuable piece of property.

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"It's strictly for money," he said. "There are more open seats here than at most schools because [city school officials] purposefully didn't place students here."

"I'm tenured; I have a job next year anyway," added Este. "I'm only here because of how important this school is to me. I don't think they should be closing a school that works. You can't replicate what they've done at this school anywhere else."

If the school is targeted for closure at the Dec. 15 school committee meeting, parents are encouraged to attend a workshop on Dec. 20 at Madison Park High School to help North Zone families learn more about the process of transitioning to a new school.

After sibling preference is taken into account, students in closing schools will have priority to choose any other school in their zone, city school officials said. The Ralph Waldo Emerson elementary school in Roxbury is also in the North Zone and slated for closure.

Boston's school closings and mergers are part of a plan to tackle a potential \$63 million shortfall next school year. If the [city schools' plan](#) is approved, it could save tens of millions of dollars, including an estimated \$10.6 million from schools closing and merging.

Other changes are also part of the proposal, including overhauling the way the city assigns students to elementary and middle schools in an effort to reduce busing costs by fall 2012.

Shea, who said he has been attending similar meetings about school closures and mergers since October, noted how calm yet constructive the Farragut meeting was.

"What a respectful audience we had asking clear and focused questions," he said after the meeting.

The meeting was unusually civil given the circumstances, and that politeness was capped off with outright charm when 7-and-a-half-year-old Zaynab Azzouzi walked to the front of the room after patiently waiting with her hand outstretched to be called on as the final participant of the question and answer session.

Azzouzi, a second-grader at Farragut who moved to the school last year after the Alexander Hamilton Elementary School in Brighton closed, handed out flowers to the school officials presenting information and fielding questions at the meeting.

"Please don't close the Farragut School," she said before the crowd as she handed flowers to Shea.





"If it closed, I'd really miss my teachers and my friends," she added later.



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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Seven-and-a-half-year-old Zaynab Azzouzi hands flowers to city school officials including Joseph Shea, an academic superintendent who led last night's meeting.

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