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Chancellor met with ire at Briarwood meeting

by Anna Gustafson , Assistant Editor

Community leaders and parents urged schools Chancellor Cathie Black to reconsider the city's plans to shutter a number of schools in southeast Queens at a town hall in Briarwood this week, saying the closures would leave holes in the hearts of communities that have vehemently advocated to keep the institutions open.

"Jamaica High School takes in our most needy — the special education children, the English as a Second Language students," Leroy Gadsden, president of the NAACP's Jamaica chapter, said of the school that is expected to close over the next couple of years. "We know the new schools won't have that mission, that priority."

More than 100 people attended Tuesday night's meeting that was organized by Black's office with Community Education Council District 28. The event was held at PS 117 in Briarwood.

Those in attendance also berated the chancellor for the city's plans to close JHS 230 in Springfield Gardens, which the city Panel for Educational Policy voted last week to shutter, and PS 30 in Rochdale Village.

The PEP will vote on the proposal to shutter PS 30 in April.

"We are here to say we're opposed to the closing," PS 30 PTA President Tareeka Kelly said. "These new schools going in get all the funding, which means the upper grades in the schools being phased out get the worst education because they're going to schools that are being closed."

Black defended the closings.

"When we approach a phaseout, we are looking at schools where the graduation rates is hovering below 50 percent for years," Black said. "When we put new schools in former structures, the statistics for those students' graduation rate has gone up 20, 30, 40 percent. The success of those same students has been dramatic."

Jamaica High School alumna Michele Gilliam said she is particularly disturbed at the fact that many of the schools the Department of Education has targeted for closure are in areas with large minority populations.

"The schools set to close — Jamaica, Beach Channel, 30, 231 — they all are in immigrant, black and/or Latino communities," Gilliam said. "The communities came out in droves against these closures. How can you possibly say you're improving the quality of education when you don't allow them to have a say in what schools exist in the neighborhoods they live in?"

Black, who has faced intense criticism from leaders in southeast Queens — and throughout the borough and city — following her appointment as chancellor by Mayor Bloomberg late last year is meeting with CEC districts throughout the city. Prior to listening to residents' concerns, the chancellor touted educational reforms she said would bring about positive change in the city, including working with the state to toughen educational standards, which she said would better allow the city to prepare students for college and careers.

She noted the city's educational record has improved in recent years, including a 17 percent jump in the graduation rate from 2005. Last year, 63 percent of public school students graduated.

Black briefly addressed proposed state budget cuts that Bloomberg has said could result in thousands of teacher layoffs.

"It's going to be a very tough year ahead of us," she said.

CEC 28 President Joseph Trotti said he was pleased residents got a chance to air concerns.

"It's good that people reminded the chancellor that education is about our children, not a bureaucracy," Trotti said.

Trotti and Kathryn Thome, the recording secretary at CEC 28, said they wished audience members had pressed Black on the specific impact of budget cuts.

"Their questions were more statements than questions," Trotti said of audience members. "It was more statements than getting information."



Schools Chancellor Cathie Black defends school closures in Queens as CEC 28 President Joseph Trotti looks on at a meeting at PS 117 in Briarwood on Tuesday. PHOTO BY PJ SMITH


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