

## Whither North High

Written by Al McFarlane and B.P. Ford, The Editors  
Wednesday, 20 October 2010 16:11

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From where we stand, the furor and angst over the possible closure of North Community High School is a good thing.

It is good because it brings to light deep and passionate concern about the education of Black children.

It breaches the gates of civility that dam the wellspring of dissatisfaction with the condition of structural marginalization.

It illuminates the scar tissue of previous surgeries that sliced and diced the Black community, in the name of fiscal reality, but wholly without the consent of the patient.

It reveals the feeling that a spike heel is being ground into the neighborhood's solar plexus, as if to make the point again that at any time, anybody can do anything to Black people.

Community organizer and North High graduate Brett Buckner makes the point from the record.

"In reading the September 22, 2009 notes regarding last year's school closing process, the district held over 40 meetings across the city to discuss the issue with over a thousand community members who had the chance to participate in the process, and conducted a public hearing with two weeks' notice," Buckner said in a letter asking that District not act precipitously, and without adequate input from community stakeholders. "The current process has had no community meetings with the public. The first meeting is scheduled for this Tuesday (Oct. 12) after staff and community were notified about Superintendent Johnson's recommendation last Friday."

Minneapolis Public Schools Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson announced in a press release Monday, Oct. 11 that she will recommend to the Board of Education Tuesday the phasing out of North High Community High School beginning the 2011-12 school year. The recommendation was not made, however, but concerned residents did voice their objections to the school board at the Tuesday board meeting.

Under the proposal, current ninth grade students would be the final class of North graduates. North would no longer be a high school option for current eighth grade students. Current North students could choose to continue at North until they graduate or choose to attend a different comprehensive high school in their attendance area. North would remain a citywide option for the high school classes of 2012, 2013 and 2014.

State Rep. Bobby Champion (DFL 58B) and State Rep. Jeff Hayden (DFL 61B) said Johnson's plan to close Minneapolis North High School sends the wrong message to the people of North Minneapolis.

"I am not ready to give up on our future, but that appears to be what some people think we should do," said Champion, a graduate of North High. "This is my home and this is our community. We need to stand together for our schools, for our children, and for our community. Now is not the time to cut and run."

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“I wouldn’t be who I am today without the education I received in North Minneapolis,” said Champion. “Let’s make sure people know that on the North Side we care about our schools and we care about our future.”

First chartered over 120 years ago, Minneapolis North has been a cultural landmark for generations of Minnesotans. While declining enrollment has presented problems for North High, Rep. Hayden said he was surprised such a drastic measure would be set in motion without more community dialogue.

“There are families that are feeling really blindsided by this,” said Hayden. “We need much more community engagement on this issue before we do something that could seriously harm a community in ways that have not been discussed or addressed.”

The e-democracy website broadened the discussion on the fate of North High School.

P. Clark, whose son graduated from MPS in 2000 wrote: “Fifteen years ago, in 1995, my stepson visited North as an option for HS, along with Washburn and Southwest (our attendance area school), and a number of privates. We lived in Uptown, and he had attended Catholic elementary school, Jefferson Community for a brief time, Anwatin, and Sanford. He was excited by North, and KBEM in particular. Although I didn’t know much about north Minneapolis myself at the time, I had heard positive comments about North as a school, and less favorable comments about the neighborhood around it.

Ours was not the only middle class family, nor the only white family, looking seriously at North for the class of 2000. It was a notably better choice than Washburn at the time for our student. Southwest was beginning its serious dedication to IB, but students not on that track weren't particularly well-served.

Looking back, I see several factors that contributed to the downward spiral of attendance at North since I looked at it in 1995:

- Murderapolis. Many middle class potential customers began to be seriously intimidated by violence on the Northside, and were less willing to put their kids on buses to the high-tech programs at North.
- Target left the Broadway location, further damaging the economic vitality of Near North.
- Several brand spanking new behemoth schools were built to replace aging and deteriorating community oriented school buildings. Someone forgot to ask the community whether they wanted K8 schools with 1200 kids in them, or options to update their smaller schools where kids could walk and parents could easily drop in.
- IB was added at Henry to increase and stabilize its enrollment.
- Crack, meth, pot and alcohol were readily available too close to the school premises, causing even Near North residents to fear the walk to school for their teenagers.
- The second NAACP lawsuit established Choice Is Yours, and offered children a way out of chronically underperforming schools.
- Increased offerings for public charter schools, providing a small school setting for families concerned with safety, and often with doorstep to school door busing.
- Increased outreach by private schools to entice high performing students of color to diversify

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their own institutions, with attractive scholarship packages.

- MPS' long-held belief that they hold the "keys to kingdom" of educational excellence and choice, while refusing to acknowledge what is going on in the world around them until it is too late.
- A revolving door for principals at North and Associate Superintendents in Area A.
- Chaos from school closings that led families with HS age children to seek stability at a safe school with good academics that will be there at the end of 4 years when we hope our children will graduate.
- Failure to act on the demographic realities predicted at least 5 years ago that MPS would not have enough HS age students to support 7 comprehensive HS.
- W aka Bush2, NCLB and its punitive mandates, educational funding nightmare

We can reflect on North's glory days and remember the great education many of our citizens received there. Today, however, we have an educational emergency with our poor students, who are often students of color or recent immigrants.

Nostalgia and tinkering with the programs and attendance zones isn't likely to reverse the downward slide. This year's freshman class is 1/3 the size of last year's class. Students and families have voted with their feet. Clearly, MPS' bungling of the open houses last fall, the random and varied communication about the CSO choice outcomes, and the negligence of oversight at the school is part of the problem. However, my personal view is that the long term damage was done over a period of years or decades, even. Without a proactive group to rebuild and strengthen North all along, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Washburn managed to right itself in the nick of time, and appears to be on an upward trajectory. I lived in Jordan for a time recently, and I know several dozen families who live in Jordan, Willard Hay, and Near North. Not a single one sends their HS kids to North today, and none were interested in going there with their younger kids. When I asked what would it take for them to choose North, they couldn't think of a thing. You can have all the great programs, all the great sports teams, a radio station, great teachers and quality marketing expertise, but that's no guarantee that students will choose to enroll.

Bottom line, though: the students at North need AND deserve a quality education. Today. Not in 3 or 4 years after the next cycle of MPS reform has run its course. Students in these communities have been waiting since Brown vs the Board of Ed affirmed their rights to an education the majority population has taken for granted in our society."

Charter School advocate and strategist Joe Nathan wrote: "It would be interesting to have the facts on the number of high school students who currently within 2 miles of North High School... and where they are attending high school. It would also be interesting to see the trends for this over the last five years. I don't have the facts, but think they might be useful in this discussion.

Striking a less sympathetic posture, Tim Bonhham wrote: "It's about time! Now on to Washburn. Based on the numbers, MPS ought to close one or two of it's 7 high schools right away. And as a taxpayer, I hope the Board pays attention to the numbers!

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The question should be which 2 schools to close. North is an obvious choice, both based on its poor performance educationally, and its poor performance with the customers -- kids won't come to it.

For the other one to close, the contest is between Southwest, Washburn, and Roosevelt. But both Southwest and Roosevelt have increasing enrollment, while Washburn is declining. And there have been some educational problems at Washburn too, indicated by the 'restart' a couple of years ago.

Seems like Washburn is the logical candidate for the next high school to close.”

Injecting humor or sarcasm into the mix, Bill Kahn wrote: “All they need do is choose and have CM Samuels put the torch to them.”

Bonham added, “Don Samuels' hyperbole about burning North High down 3 years ago now looks rather prophetic when he said ‘Get rid of the damn thing! It hasn't worked!’

We taxpayers would have been way better off if the School Board had shuttered North High 3 years ago.”

“As superintendent, I promised to put students first in all my decisions – a vow that will require me to make some difficult and unpopular decisions,” said Johnson. “Closing the achievement gap requires bold action that I am willing to take. We can no longer fail our young people. I am prepared to do whatever is necessary to reverse the trend of failure.”

“Despite reform and recruitment efforts at North, enrollment and academic performance continue to decline. Enrollment at the school has declined by 75 percent in the past six years, from 1,143 students in 2004-05 to 265 students today. Even with additional programs, such as Adult Basic Education, Broadway High School and Dunwoody Academy, occupying space at North, the building serves significantly below its capacity of approximately 1,700. The small enrollment makes North the most expensive high school to operate per student - \$3,970 compared to the high school average of \$1,555,” Johnson said.