

BCSA PARTNERS IN MASSIVE GRASSROOTS EFFORT TO HALT CHARTER SCHOOL EXPANSION

The stage was set for the majority on the Buffalo Board of Education to advance its intention to expand the number of charter schools in the city. It is widely known that the majority ran on a platform of replacing Buffalo Public Schools with charter schools as quickly and widely as possible. Their work is under the guise of improving results for children when, in fact, they are union busters.

There were four target schools all of which are being “phased out” due to a mandate from the State Education Department. The schools were Bennett High School, East High School, Lafayette High School and Dr. Martin Luther King Multicultural School. As part of the process for replacing the “phase out” schools, the District solicited proposals for new replacement schools. In each case, volunteer school teams wrote and submitted proposals for the retention of the schools as part of the Buffalo Public School District. In order for the proposals to advance to the SED, the Buffalo Board of Education had to vote to endorse them. A massive grassroots community, political effort was launched to persuade at least five of the nine Board members to vote for passage. The BCSA President Crystal Barton rallied her members to support the community effort. She, herself, spoke on behalf of the school proposals and worked behind the scenes to keep the schools part of the Buffalo District.

The strategy of the majority was to deny the proposals, empty the schools and turn them over to the charters.

Meanwhile, Board majority members actually took charter school personnel to measure at Bennett. Tapestry Charter School announced to its parents that the school would be moving to Bennett in the fall. Their expectation was that they would get the recently reconstructed building on a long-term, rent-free lease. They would get all the furnishings in the school including computers, labs, gym equipment, etc. The building would be empty—meaning that current Bennett students would have to transfer to other schools. Tapestry would not accommodate them.

As part of their anti-union stance, the majority said that they could not pass the proposals because an MOU for an extended day program hadn’t been signed with the Buffalo Teachers Federation. President Phil Rumore was poised to sign the MOU but said they he could only do so when the proposal was finally passed by the Board. It was a stalemate. The majority then tried to blame the union for the negative vote. Proposal supporters were outraged.

Superintendent Donald Ogilvie, seeing that the majority would vote against the proposals, offered an alternative resolution. He suggested the expansion of “in demand” programs in the District into the space available in the affected schools. The vote was taken during a highly

emotional and packed meeting. The Superintendent's resolution was defeated. It seemed that the schools were doomed to become charters.

With the defeat of the Superintendent's resolution, the majority put forth their own plan to weaken the unions and take over the buildings. In a dramatic turn of events, the Board minority threatened a filibuster and ultimately the majority agreed to amendments that adopted the Superintendent's plan and prevented any charter school from moving into a reconstructed school in Buffalo.

As a result, the existing Middle Early College HS will move to Bennett. East High School will house the District's alternative programs, MLK will become a K-4 feeder program to the Performing Arts School and Lafayette will become a Newcomer's Academy for foreign students. The expansion of charter schools in these buildings was halted. This could not have been accomplished without the massive outpouring of the community and the support of our unions. It took cooperation and an effective team effort to prevail.