

## **23 Philadelphia Schools to Close in June (Published on PhillyLiving)**

Thursday night, the School Reform Commission (SRC) voted to decide the fate of 27 Philadelphia schools, more than 10 percent of the schools in the district, in an attempt to improve the district's dire financial situation. This year the commission was forced to borrow \$300 million just to make ends meet, and an almost \$1.4 billion deficit is projected for the next five years without a major overhaul. Community members worry that consolidating schools will lead to longer walks for young students, often through dangerous neighborhoods.

Despite community protests, including a massive rally which resulted in over a dozen arrests, the SRC voted to close 23 of the 27 schools, and planned to vote on two more schools at a later date. Officials say that the downsizing will save the district about \$24.5 million annually. The closures will take effect after classes end in June, in addition to an unspecified number of layoffs, including principals, building engineers, and maintenance workers, according to district spokesman Fernando Gallard. Gallard does not anticipate any teacher layoffs because the student population should remain the same.

The Philadelphia school district currently has 12 vacant schools on the market, six of which have been approved for sale by the SRC. A recent study indicated that urban school districts often have trouble unloading closed schools because of poor real estate markets, undesirable locations, and bad building conditions, among other reasons. Pew researchers say that urban school districts tend to overestimate how much they'll save from closing schools, and how much they'll make from selling the empty buildings. Pew Project Director Larry Eichel, who led the study, says that the longer a vacant school sits on the market, the harder it is to sell. The old Roberto Clemente Middle School building in North Philadelphia was recently sold to a local community group for only \$1, after sitting empty for nearly a decade, and falling into disrepair.

SRC Chairman Pedro Ramos said in a statement that the decision to close 23 schools was difficult, "but it focused on our goal to provide safe, high-quality seats while being fiscally responsible." Ramos said that the commission's next step is to focus on making the transition a smooth one. "The responsibility now shifts to make sure everything we've talked about the past few months gets done."